Jeremiah

By Dr. Gary Yates

30 Sessions on Jeremiah available online in full video/audio/text

© 2013, Dr. Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt
# Table of Contents

(to activate links: Control+Click)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 1</th>
<th>The Old Testament Prophet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 2</td>
<td>Misunderstandings of the Old Testament Prophets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 3</td>
<td>Historical Setting: International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 4</td>
<td>Israel’s Final Kings: Jeremiah’s Domestic Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 5</td>
<td>Composition of Jeremiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 6</td>
<td>Overview of Jeremiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 7</td>
<td>The Call of Jeremiah (Jer 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 8</td>
<td>Jeremiah 2-3: The Marriage Metaphor—God and Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 9</td>
<td>The Lord’s Dispute with Israel (Jer 2-3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 10</td>
<td>Jeremiah 3:1-4:4--The Call to Repentance: Shuv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 11</td>
<td>Jeremiah 4:5-6:30. The Coming Invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 12</td>
<td>Temple Sermon (Jer 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 13</td>
<td>The Destruction of an Idol Worshipping People (Jer 8-10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 14</td>
<td>The Prayers of Jeremiah: Laments and Imprecations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 15</td>
<td>Jeremiah’s Confessions: The Pathos of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 16</td>
<td>Jeremiah 11-20: Jeremiah’s Confessions (Part 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Pathos of the People of God and Jeremiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 17</td>
<td>Prophetic Sign Acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 18</td>
<td>False Prophets (Jer 23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 19</td>
<td>Jeremiah 26-45: A Structural Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 20</td>
<td>The Unbelief of Jehoiakim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 21</td>
<td>Death to the Nation and Life to the Remnant (Jer 34-35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 22</td>
<td>The Prophetic Conflict (Jer 27-29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 23</td>
<td>Zedekiah’s Disobedience and the Fall of Jerusalem (Jer 37-39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 24</td>
<td>Jeremiah 30-33: Book of Consolation, Promise of Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 25</td>
<td>The Book of Consolation and the Aftermath of the Exile, Jer 30-33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 26</td>
<td>The New Covenant (Jer 30-33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 27</td>
<td>Stages of Restoration (Jer 30-33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 28</td>
<td>Stages of Restoration (Jer 30-33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 29</td>
<td>Oracles Against the Nations (Jer 46-48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 30</td>
<td>The Oracles Against the Nations: Babylon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is Doctor Garry Yates leading us in a presentation of the book of Jeremiah. In lecture number one, he’s going to discuss, Jeremiah, as an Old Testament prophet.

Hi, I’m Garry Yates. I’m an associate professor of Old Testament at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia. I’m looking forward to the opportunity of leading us through a study of the book of Jeremiah. I love the book of Jeremiah because I believe that he has a message for our society and culture today and also because of his love and his passion for God and for God’s word. I hope that that’s something that will rub off on us.

I’d like to begin our study with a couple of sessions just thinking of Jeremiah in the context of the Old Testament prophets. The prophets tend to be a part of the Bible that we’re not very familiar with, and so I’d like to just generally introduce us to the message of the prophets and to think about Jeremiah as an Old Testament prophet.

Prophets as Watchmen

The first way that I would like to present and help us understand the prophets is that they are described in the Old Testament as God’s “watchmen.” What that means is that a watchmen had the role of standing on the walls of the city and warning the people about the attack of an enemy army. The prophets, in a real sense, are God’s watchmen warning the people of Israel that judgment is coming against them. In the book of Jeremiah chapter 6 verse 17, we see this picture of the prophets. The Lord says, “I set watchmen over you saying, ‘Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet.’ But they said, ‘We will not pay attention.’” So, in other words, the prophets were announcing that judgment was coming; that an enemy was about to invade and attack Israel. They were warning them about
something that was coming in the near future and that was their role and their mission.

First of all, God sent the prophets during the Assyrian crisis as the Assyrians were coming to punish God’s people for disobedience. Then there was a wave of prophets during the Babylonian crisis that Jeremiah belongs to. Then there were the Persian prophets during the post-exilic period as the people were coming back to the land yet God was still warning them that there was going to be more judgment if they did not change their ways and turn back to him. The role of the prophets and the reason that God raised these prophets up in the first place was to prepare the people for the crisis that they were preparing to face.

Ezekiel chapter 3 also talks about the prophet as God’s “watchmen” and he says if the prophet warns the people of the judgment that’s coming and he sees the sword, and he prepares the people, then the prophet has fulfilled his mission and done his job. It’s the people’s responsibility then to listen and to pay attention. So they were warning the people about a crisis that was coming.

I remember a number of years ago when I was living in Florida and it was the first time we had experienced a hurricane while I was there. We decided that I wanted to go down to the beach and see a hurricane up close. And I remember a policeman being on the bridge as we were going across the inter-costal waterway warning us with some very colorful metaphors that we needed to get away. When I think about the prophets I think about that policeman, standing on the bridge and warning about the imminent danger and that was the role and the mission of the prophets and Jeremiah in particular. Jeremiah is warning the people that the Babylonians are coming and that they need to repent and change their ways because God is preparing to judge them.

Prophet as God’s Spokesman

I think that the second way we should think about the prophets is that they are the spokesmen of God. The word prophet essentially means “called one” and the prophets are messengers of God. Three-hundred and fifty times in the prophets
we see the expression: “Thus says the Lord.” Some people have the image or conception of an Old Testament prophet that they were like political commentators who had an especially keen insight into the political or religious affairs of their day. That’s not really a biblical understanding. More than that, they are messengers of God speaking who are speaking the word of God. Second Timothy chapter 3 reminds us that “all Scripture is God-breathed and that it’s spoken by God.” So as the prophets were speaking their message it was not just brilliant observations of people who had insight into their culture and their circumstances, they were speaking a message from God. Second Peter chapter 1 says that, “No Scripture or no prophecy ever came by private interpretation, but that holy men of God spoke as they were moved along by the spirit of God,” The image that Peter uses there is of a sail being guided by the wind. That’s way the prophets were guided and directed by God.

God’s Word in Jeremiah

So we’re going to be looking at Jeremiah as a spokesman of God and in the book of Jeremiah that’s especially important in the way the prophet is portrayed. Throughout the book of Jeremiah the words of God and the words of the prophet are going to be identified as one in the same. In fact in the first verse of the book of Jeremiah it says, “the words of Jeremiah” and then in verse two “through whom the word of the Lord came.” There is an idea often that the Bible contains the word of God or that the Bible is a testimony to the word of God, that really doesn’t go along with the theology of Jeremiah because Jeremiah is going to say the words of the human prophet are actually the words of God himself. We are going to see that in various ways in the book.

Jeremiah also as a man literally becomes a living embodiment of the word of God as well. In one passage he will say, “I ate. I consumed the words of Lord and internalized them into my life and they were my delight.” When Jeremiah did that, he actually became a living expression of God’s word for the people to see. God did not just want to send the people a message; he wanted to send them a
person who conveyed that message. When they saw the grief or weeping of Jeremiah, what they could literally see in Jeremiah’s life was the weeping of God himself. They could see a living expression of that word.

So Jeremiah is a spokesman of God, a watchman of God announcing a judgment, a disaster, a catastrophe that is about to happen and this is not his word, these are the words of God.

Prophet as Covenant Messengers

The third way that I think we need to think about the prophets and view them and understand them is that in the Old Testament, the prophets are God’s covenantal messengers. In the ancient Near East, a king would implement his rule through the establishing of covenants. In the political world of Jeremiah’s day, kings would make covenants with other people. Great kings who were leaders of empires made covenants with their vassals. So the Old Testament as it talks about the kingship of God has God exercising his kingship through a series of covenants. When a king wanted to remind the people that they were under his rule, or the vassals nations who paid tribute to him to remind them of their covenantal responsibilities, he would often send out his ambassadors or messengers. That’s what the prophets were doing for the Lord. If a king sent out his ambassadors, his messengers, and reminded the people of their covenantal responsibilities and they fulfilled those, then things would go well. But if a vassal nation did not pay attention to the covenant messengers, if they were not fulfilling their responsibilities, then they would ultimately have to answer to the king. So the prophets are going out as God’s ambassadors, as God’s messengers.

Scott Deval and Danny Hayes, in their book *Grasping God’s Word* summarized the covenantal message of the prophets with four points. The first point they are going to say is the prophets come to announce as God’s covenantal messengers “you have sinned and you have broken the covenant. The terms, and the agreements and the arrangements we have made. You have not lived up to your covenantal responsibilities.” The second part of their covenantal message is
“you need to change; you need to repent, and turn around.” One of the key theological terms in the book of Jeremiah is “to turn” [shub] which means “to repent.” Literally it means to “turn around.” So the prophet is telling the people to make a u-turn. You need to change your ways because you have broken your covenant and you need to come back to those responsibilities that God has given to you.

The third point in their covenantal message is that the prophets would say “if there is no repentance then there is going to be judgment.” Here is where they become the watchmen, the judgment of God is around the corner, the judgment of God, the day of the Lord, is about to occur. So if you do not repent, here’s the consequence of your choices.

Finally, the fourth part of their covenantal message is that after the judgment occurs, there is going to be a restoration. The prophets never speak of God’s judgment without also speaking of God’s restoration. Israel was God’s covenant people, and the Lord may judge them, but the Lord was not going to cast them away. As a parent, when my children do something to disobey me, there have been many times when I’ve had to punish them, or correct them. But there was never a time where I considered tossing them out of my family. God is not going to break his covenant relationship with Israel in spite of the fact they have broken their covenant with him. So after this judgment there is going to be restoration.

In the book of Jeremiah there is an intense message of judgment in this book, right at the very center of the book, in chapters 30-33, there is a section where God talks about the fact that he will restore the fortunes of his people. Even a prophet like Amos who probably has the most severe message of judgment in all of the prophets at the very end of the book, the Lord is going to rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David and he is going to restore his people.

So those are the key aspects of their covenant message that you have sinned and broken the covenant number. Number two, you need to repent you need to
change you ways. Number three, if there is no repentance there is going to be judgment and that’s ultimately what happened. But then fourthly, after the judgment, there is going to be restoration.

Old Testament Covenants

Now to look a little bit more specifically at the prophets as messengers of the covenant I’d like us to think about specific covenants that God established with his people in the Old Testament and how those covenants are related to the larger message of the Old Testament and to the message of the prophets in particular.

After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, after the fall took place, God would begin to administer his kingship through a series of covenants. And at the beginning of creation God had said that he blessed humanity, he said “I want you to be fruitful and multiply, I want you to enjoy my creation, I want to bless you.” But when humanity sins God has to do a work of redemption and through these series of covenants God is bringing people back into the blessing that he originally designed for them.

Noahic Covenant

The first mention of the covenant that we have is in Genesis 6-9. God in those chapters makes a covenant with Noah and in that covenant with Noah we sort of see the design for all of the covenants. There are going to be promises. There are also going to be responsibilities. The promise that God gives to Noah after the flood is that he will never again destroy the earth by a flood, in the way he has just destroyed it. But the obligation that the Lord places on Noah is that man as they eat animals are not to consume the blood because it represents life itself, and humanity is also to punish those who shed human blood; “whoever sheds man’s blood by man shall his blood be shed.” So God makes a promise so that the earth and so that creation can continue. God also places obligations on humanity so that the conditions of blessing can be enjoyed and experienced.
Abrahamic Covenant

After humanity rebels against God again at the Tower of Babel and chooses to go its way rather then God’s way, God institutes a second covenant. God makes a covenant with Abraham. Now God’s design is that he’s going to work through one man, through one group of people, through one nation so they might become the instrument of that blessing to all of humanity. When God originally calls Abraham, the word “to bless” appears five times; that’s the goal of the covenant as this covenant works itself out. In Genesis chapter 12, in Genesis 15, in Genesis 17 and Genesis 22, God ultimately makes three promises to Abraham. He says to Abraham: number one, I’m going to make you a great nation. Number two, I’m going to give you a land for your procession forever and for all time. Number three, I am going to use you to be the instrument of blessing to all people. So God again is not just interested in Abraham, he is not just interested in his descendants; through Abraham all of the nations on earth will be blessed. In that covenant God also places obligations on Abraham. He says, “You are to walk before me and to be blameless so you can become that instrument of blessing.” Then along with that, Abraham and his descendants are to practice circumcision, as a sign of the covenant. So God establishes that arrangement with Abraham. He seals that with an oath when Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son and through this Israel, Abraham’s descendants, will become the chosen people of God.

Sinaitic Covenant

The third of covenant in the Old Testament is the Mosaic or the Sinaitic covenant after God had already redeemed Israel out of Egypt. He’s established them as his people through Abraham; now he has chosen them as his nation. But his covenant establishes them as a nation. It provides a constitution for them, and in a sense it informs them how to live their lives as God’s chosen people. Keeping the law did not save the Israelites in the Old Testament; the Lord says, “I have carried you on eagles’ wings. I have brought you to myself. I have already brought you into a relationship; this is how you live that relationship out. In Exodus
chapter 19 verses 5 and 6, the Lord explains the special relationship that God has with Israel. He said, “He is going to make them a kingdom of priests. I’m going to make you a holy nation, and I am going to make you my treasured possession in all of the earth.” Now as a kingdom of priests, what that meant is that Israel would be a royal nation but they would also be a priestly nation. They would mediate God’s presence and God’s blessing to all of the nations of the earth. They way they would do that is by obeying the terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandment that God gave them that summarize that message, and then the 613 commandments that laid out all of the details. In the covenantal relationship the Lord said, “If you obey this covenant I will bless you. I will give you prosperity; I’ll give you long life. I will allow you to enjoy all of the great things I have prepared for you in the promise land, but if you disobey this covenant I will punish you. I will drive you out of the land, and instead of experiencing life and blessing, you will experience cursing and death.”

The terms of this covenant are laid out a little bit more clearly for us in two passages: Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In those passages the Lord gives us the blessing and the curses of the covenant: “Here’s what I will do for you if you obey; here’s the great things that I will give you. I will give you large families and long life and the privilege of living in this land flowing with milk and honey.” But the curses which ultimately Israel will experience are going to be exile and death, and impoverishment, and slavery to these other nations. The Lord says, “that if you disobey me I will eventually even drive you out of the land and send you back to Egypt, the place that you came from.”

So the terms of that are laid out very clearly; by living out God’s law, they would show the nations the greatness of God and bring them back into the sphere of his blessing. Deuteronomy chapter 4 says that “when the nations around Israel would observe them obeying the law they would say, ‘What nation has a God like Israel’s that is so great and so wonderful to give them these laws that they could live by?’” When they saw how much God would bless Israel in their obedience,
the nations would be drawn to Israel and say, “Please tell us about your God. We want to know him!” That was God’s missionary concern and missionary emphasis in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 42 the Lord says, “I have made my law great and glorious, so that the nations around you would want to follow the Lord and know him!”

But we know from reading the story of the Old Testament from the history of Israel that God’s design did not really work out in that particular way. Instead of leading the other nations to worship God, what happened is that Israel was drawn to worshiping the gods of the nations. Instead of keeping and following God’s commands in every way possible, we have a story of hundreds and hundreds of years of disobedience, and God’s plan and God’s design was ultimately not going to be fulfilled just by the Mosaic and the Sinaitic covenant.

Daviddic Covenant

So the fourth covenant that God establishes is that God makes a covenant with a specific individual and family within Israel and that’s the Daviddic covenant. A key passage for that Daviddic covenant is in 2 Samuel chapter 7. What God was doing through the Daviddic covenant was ultimately providing a way that the blessings and the promises of those earlier covenants could be fulfilled. God had promised to Abraham, “I’ll give you a land.” Israel needed a king who would help them to keep and possess that land. Lord said “I will bless you if you obey the covenant” and Israel had failed and even up until the time of David, they were not living according to God’s commands. God provided them a leader that would give them a model of what it meant to follow God. The king was to actually write out his own individual copy of commandments of God as he came to throne, so that he would know the way he’s supposed to rule [Deut. 17]. He was not just your typical ancient Near Eastern king who could rule anyway he wanted. He was to live under the ruler-ship of God. The Lord even made a special promise “that even if this one man will obey and follow me, then I will bless entire nation.” The Lord knew it was going to be very difficult for this entire people, this entire nation to follow
him. So this Davidic covenant said, “If this one man, if he will follow God, I will bless and I will prosper the nation.” But again, we know that the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, in many ways were no more successful in following the Lord than the people themselves were. They were drawn into model of being like an ancient Near Eastern king who could do whatever he wanted, or sleep with whomever he wanted, or take whatever he wanted, or acquire wealth and military power for himself in any way he wanted. So, in spite of good kings that were part of the Davidic line, they became as much as part of the problem as they were a solution.

New Covenant

So we have this series of covenants: God first of all made a covenant with Noah and all of humanity; God made a covenant with Abraham; God made a covenant with Moses and people of Israel; God made a covenant with David. But in a sense the story of Old Testament is one of a long history of failure. What happens is the prophets come along and they announce a fifth covenant that God will make with his people, and again a covenant that will ultimately extend to all the peoples and all the nations of world. The prophets promise that God is going to make a new covenant with people of Israel. In a sense what is going to happen is that God is going to tear up the old contract, where there have been so many failures, and God is going to make new covenant and new contract. By the time that we get to Jeremiah, the people of Israel and Judah have disobeyed the terms of Mosaic covenant for 800 years, and the Lord says “in my grace and in my mercy, what I’m going to do is I’m going to establish a new covenant with my people.”

Now sometimes today, whenever an athlete has a really good year and a good season he will come back to the team and end of season and say, “I’d like to renegotiate my contract. You’re not paying me enough money.” But what happens when an athlete has a terrible year and season? He doesn’t come back and say, “Look, I’d like you to take money away from me; I didn’t earn it, I didn’t deserve it.” Well, what God does is that his people have definitely failed the contract. They
have not lived up to the terms and conditions, but God graciously says, “I’m going to make a new covenant with the people of Israel.” One of the key passages about that new covenant is actually found in Jeremiah, Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31-34. What the Lord says, in that covenant are two things: He says first of all I am going to forgive the failures of the previous eight centuries. The Lord says, “Their sins and their iniquities, their transgressions I will remember no more.” The God of universe who knows everything, the one thing he is going to choose to have selective memory loss about are the sins of his people. So, that promise of the new covenant takes care of the failures of past. What the Lord also says is that, “I am also going to provide enablement and empowerment for the future, where I’m going to take my law and I’m going to write it on the hearts of my people. I’m going to give them desire, ability and enablement to live by my commands, so that they will never again have to experience my judgment. They will never again have to go through the exile and all of the things the people experienced during life and time of Jeremiah. I imagine this almost like when we see a sign that says “do not walk on the grass” or “don’t touch, wet paint.” Our natural tendency is to want to walk on the grass. Or our natural tendency is to want to touch wall to see if it is still wet. What God is saying is: “I’m going to take those laws that are external to you, and I’m actually going to place in your heart a desire to follow that and to obey that.

Covenant Summary

So as we study the book of Jeremiah and as we come to look at the message of the prophets, what we’re going to understand is that the message of prophets was based on those five specific covenants that God makes throughout Old Testament. On the basis on Noahic and Mosaic covenants, God is going to announce judgment. Isaiah chapter 24 verses 1-5, the prophet Isaiah pictures a time when God is going to judge the entire world and it says, “The whole world is going to shake under God’s judgment.” That judgment will occur because they have broken the everlasting covenant. That covenant is not talking about the
Mosaic law; that was a covenant God made with Israel. The covenant that he’s referring to is the Noahic covenant that said “man is not to shed blood. Man is not to perpetrate violence. Whoever sheds man’s blood by man shall his blood be shed.” God is going to hold the nations of earth accountable for their violations for Noahic covenant.

In Habakkuk chapter 2, when the Lord announces a woe on people of Babylon, he says, “They are a city that has been built on bloodshed.” So as a result of their have violated Noahic covenant, God is going to bring judgment. In Amos chapter 1 and 2, God announces judgment on the nations that are surrounding Israel and Judah. The basis of that judgment are the violence and the inhumane things they’ve done to each; the monstrosities they’ve committed. God has observed that. God has seen that and on the basis of the Noahic covenant. God will judge nations in history, and on the basis of the Noahic covenant God is going to judge nations in the future. So the prophets’ message of judgments is based on that covenant. Now on the basis of Mosaic covenant and on the basis of the 613 commands, and specifically the Ten Commandments God had given to Israel, God announces that he’s going to judge people of Israel. When we come to Jeremiah chapter 7, the Lord says this to the people as Jeremiah is delivering a message at temple. He says this, verse 5, chapter 7: “if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you don’t oppress the sojourners or the fatherless or the widow or shed innocent blood and if you do not, go after other gods to your own harm, then I will allow you to dwell in this place.” If you listen to what Jeremiah is saying there very closely, what you end up hearing are the words of the Ten Commandments. Jeremiah is saying, “You violated this covenant and as a result of that, God is going to bring judgment.”

The Prophet Hosea does same thing in Hosea chapter 4, verses 1-2. He’s going to bring an indictment, he’s going to announce God’s judgment and the basis of that judgment is the fact that the people have not lived up to God’s commandments. Here’s the message: “Hear the word of the Lord, O children of
Israel, for the word of Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, there is no knowledge of God and land.” They haven’t lived up to the terms of the covenant. Here’s what they are: there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery. They are breaking all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed. If you read that closely, what you hear are five of the Ten Commandments. God is saying you have not lived up to terms of the commandments; therefore God’s going to bring judgment. The Lord is also on basis of Mosaic covenant going to say, ‘there are specific curses that the Lord is bringing against the people of Israel. When we look at those curses, they go directly back to Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, the passages that we talked about just a few minutes ago. The Lord is going to bring exile, the Lord is going to bring enemy nations, the Lord is going to bring on you all of the things that he has warned you about if you disobey. So what the prophets are doing is announcing, “Listen people, you need to understand the covenant curses. Moses warned about them 800 years ago.”

Those curses are here in the present and you need to change your ways or things are going to get worse. Moses was in 1400 BC stating the covenant curses are coming. The prophets are saying the covenant curses are here, you need to wake up and realize what God is doing.

When Moses made the original covenant with the people as they were preparing to go into the land, he said “I am calling heaven and earth as witnesses. They will silently observe and testify to whether you keep this covenant.” When we come to the first chapter of the book of Isaiah, Isaiah says, “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth.” What the prophet is doing is bringing the witnesses into the courtroom. He’s bringing the heavens and the earth to listen, how has Israel kept the covenant? The answer is obviously they have not. So on the basis of that, God is announcing judgment. The prophets were God’s ambassadors. They were bringing this message based on the covenants that God had established. But along with that, what we also see is that the promises of the prophets are based on the
covenants that God has made as well. The promise that God made to Noah is the reason that God patiently gives people opportunity to repent, and patiently why God has not destroyed people. The New Testament tells us “God is not willing, that any should perish, but all should come to repentance.” As a result of that, the Lord is delaying the final judgment of the Day of the Lord when the whole world will be judged. The Lord is delaying that on the basis of his promises, on the basis of the Mosaic covenant.

God wants his people to enjoy the blessings of this land that is flowing with milk and honey. God gave them a special place, and so the Lord is going to act to restore them, to bring them back.

On the basis of the Davidic covenant, God promises that there is going to be a future David who will fulfill all of the promises that God had made to Israel. Remember, the terms of the covenant that God made with David, God said in 2 Samuel 7: “I am going to raise up a son after you who will reign in your place,” that promise related to Solomon, “but on top of that, I am going to establish your family and your dynasty and your throne and they are going to rule forever.” The Lord confirmed that promise with an oath to David, and he says “it’s not going to be like with Solomon, I will never take that promise away from you.” But the Lord had also said, to the house of David, “I will bless your sons if you obey, I will punish your sons if they disobey; I will scourge them, I will punish them with whips if they disobey.” So every individual king within that Davidic line was either blessed or punished on the basis of their obedience to the Davidic covenant.

Things become so bad in Jeremiah’s day that the Lord ultimately removes the Davidic kings from the throne. There has not been a Davidic king reigning in Jerusalem now for twenty-five hundred years. But what the prophets are also going to say is that God is not finished with that promise yet. The Lord has a future for David because after the exile, after they have been off the throne, even if it’s been twenty-five hundred years, the Lord is going to restore a Davidic king. All of these kings in the past, they have been a failure, even the good kings, like
Josiah or Hezekiah, or David, they were a failure in some way. But this future Davidic king is going to be everything that God designed the house of David to be. So throughout the prophets we see dozens of promises where the Lord says “I am going to raise up a new David. I am going to restore the fallen tabernacle of David’s house.”

In Jeremiah 23: “there is going to be a righteous branch that will sprout from this tree stump that the Lord has felled this tree”, but there is a branch that is going to spring out from that. Jeremiah says “David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne.” God’s going to continue the Davidic line and all of those promises are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The promise that David’s sons would reign forever is being fulfilled today as Jesus reigns at the right hand of God, but those promises are found in the prophets.

R.E. Clements says that 2 Samuel 7, and the covenant promise that God made to David is the “seed of all of the messianic prophecies and promises that we have in the Old Testament of prophets.” So at Christmas time, when you hear Isaiah 9, or you hear Handel’s Messiah: “unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government will be upon his shoulders,” ultimately those promises are going back to that Davidic covenant. When we see Jeremiah saying, “The Lord’s going to raise up a righteous branch” those promises are going back to the Davidic covenant.

Then finally, the note the new covenant is ultimately the thing that will cause all of these covenants, all of these promises to come about, because the Lord is going to fix the sin problem that had always brought failure and misery.

So, Jeremiah is a prophet of the new covenant. The key passage Jeremiah 31:31-34, but Jeremiah is not the only prophet who talks about this. Isaiah says that the Lord is going to make an everlasting covenant with his people. In Isaiah 59:20-21, he is going to put his spirit within them, and by putting his spirit within them, that’s how he is going to write the law on the people’s hearts. Ezekiel 36:26-28, which is almost an exact parallel text to Jeremiah 31, is going to say, “I am
going to give the people a new heart.” How is the Lord going to do that? How is he going to write the law on his heart? As Jeremiah talks about it he says “I will wash them with water, I will cleanse them; I will put my spirit within them.”

The prophet Joel says, “That in the last days there will be a great pouring out of the Spirit of God.” It will not be like in the days of the old covenant where the spirit primarily was poured out on the kings and the judges and the prophets, but the Lord is going to pour out his Spirit on all of the sons and daughters of Israel. It’s that empowerment of the Spirit; it’s that pouring out of the Spirit, that’s what’s going to enable all of this to come about and to take place.

The amazing thing in the New Testament, and I believe in many ways is that the prophetic promises of the new covenant are the bridge from the Old to the New Testament. Jesus announces that his mission is to bring that new covenant into place. Jesus announces to his disciples when they observe the Lord’s Supper together, the last supper, “this is the blood of the New Covenant.” This brings about the forgiveness that the New Covenant has envisioned. “This is my blood poured out for you,” so that you can enjoy and experience this. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3, “Who is sufficient for the calling that God has given to us? None of us are sufficient for that, but God makes us sufficient because we are messengers of the New Covenant.” Taking that idea of the law being written on the hearts of God’s people, Paul says to the Corinthians, “You are my epistle written on my heart, the changes that God has brought about in your heart and your life, their testimony, this new covenant is real.”

When we get to the book of Hebrews, in Hebrews 8 and Hebrews 10 we have some of the longest quotations of the Old Testament, and any place or any passage in the New Testament. The passage that the writer of Hebrews quotes for us is Jeremiah 31 saying, “Why do you want to go back to the old covenant? Why do you want to go back to the sacrifices? Why do you want to go back to the temple? Why do you want to go back to the Levites? Jesus has come to actualize and to bring into place for us today the new covenant that the prophets have
promised for us.”

Summary and Conclusion

So, in our first session today, we've looked at the prophet’s in three ways. First of all, we have been reminded of that fact that they were God’s “watchmen.” They were given an awesome responsibility. They stood on the wall, and they announced to the people “look, judgment is coming it’s around the corner; you need to change your ways.” Second, the prophets were messengers of God, and they came to say “thus says the Lord.” This is not my opinion; this is not, in fact the prophets who in many ways often tried as much as they could to get out of this. This is not my idea; this is the message of God. And finally, they were messengers of the covenant. And on the basis of both the covenants of judgment and the warnings of judgment and the promises and the blessings and the oaths that God had made to Israel and to all of humanity, the prophets preached, “There is going to be judgment and there is going to be salvation.” As we look at the whole Scripture we understand that all of these covenants are like an arrow that are ultimately leading us and pointing us to Jesus. So as we study Jeremiah the prophet, we’re going to see that the things Jeremiah was announcing to the people that day were ultimately leading them to Christ and ultimately can help us to know and to enjoy and to experience and to understand all that we have in Christ in a fuller and deeper way.

I look forward to the time that we have together to study this book and to learn more about the message of the prophets.
Misunderstandings of the Old Testament Prophets

This is Dr. Gary Yates, leading us in a presentation of the book of Jeremiah. In session number 2, he will continue the discussion of Jeremiah as an Old Testament prophet. In session 2, he will focus on the common misunderstandings in regard to Old Testament prophets.

Review and Introduction

In our second session on the book of Jeremiah, we’re continuing to think about the message of Jeremiah in light of the Old Testament prophets. The prophets are a part of the Bible that many of us are not familiar with. It may be something that we haven’t read or studied or heard many messages about in our churches. So in this session, I would like to talk about some common misunderstandings of the prophets and try to correct that and give us a better understanding, a portrait of Jeremiah, as the spokesman of God.

Remember in our last session that we talked about three things concerning the prophets that I think are very important. Number one, they are God’s watchmen. They were announcing the coming judgment. The Lord raised up the writing prophets for a specific crisis that was going on in Israel. Number two, they are messengers of God. They are not there to speak their own words; they are there to speak words of God. And number three, they are messengers of the covenant. On the basis of God’s warnings, and the curses of those covenants, the prophets are announcing judgment. On the basis of the promises of those covenants, the prophets are promising blessings and things that God will do for the people.

Misunderstanding #1: Prophets were Angry Messengers of God’s Judgment

There are some huge misunderstandings about the prophets that I’d like to try to address in this session. The first misunderstanding that I often hear people talking about when they address the prophets is that they are often viewed as
simply angry messengers of a raging God who is looking forward to destroying people. Maybe we think of a preacher who preaches with a red face and the veins sticking out in his neck and seems to enjoy talking about God’s judgment, that’s the image that many people have of the prophets. In many ways as we’re looking at Jeremiah we are going to see the message of an angry God. I’m reminded working through Jeremiah of Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God;” that’s a summary of what Jeremiah is going to speak about, as well. Jeremiah says in one place, “I am filled with the wrath and the indignation of God.” We definitely see that message coming out. There are extreme pictures and images of judgment and the severity of that.

In Jeremiah chapter 9, verse 21, there is a picture of death climbing in through the windows to take the lives of the people of Judah and then the mourning and the grief that’s going to take place as a result of that. Jeremiah is going to portray Judah as God’s unfaithful wife and we’ll look at that in one of our later sessions. In chapter 13, verses 26 and 27, the Lord says he is going to strip her naked and expose her shame to all of the nations. When we read that and we’re jarred by the imagery. Jeremiah chapter 12, verse 13, makes reference to the fierce anger of the Lord. Jeremiah 23:20 says that “the fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he’s accomplished all that he designed and he intended.” So were the prophets angry messengers of judgment? Absolutely, but the other side of the prophets that we need to understand is that some of the most heartfelt expressions and most passionate expressions of God’s love and mercy and compassion are all also found in the prophets.

Brent Sandy in his book *Plow Shares and Pruning Hooks* says, “That in the prophets we have God’s love and God’s wrath, presented to us at the extremes.” So we see the most extreme expressions of God’s anger but along with that, we also see some of the most beautiful pictures of God’s love; I think of Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 2 where the Lord says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” This is just the reminder that comes out of that for Israel and for us as well.
There is nothing that could have caused God to love his people less. There is no
thing that could’ve caused God to love his people more, because he loves them
with an everlasting love. In spite of the fact that his fierce anger will not turn back,
that love is still there.

In Hosea 11, verses 8 and 9 as the Lord is preparing to judge Israel, he says,
“How can I give you up, oh, Ephraim because the Lord loves these people.” So he
says as a result of that, I will not fully execute all of my anger because I love you
and I can’t turn back from that. Isaiah 40 as God promises to bring the people back
from exile. He pictures himself as a shepherd who is carrying his sheep in his arms
and tenderly and affectionately making sure that they are going to be absolutely
safe in this entire process, that’s what God is going to do.

The Lord says in Ezekiel chapter 33 verse 11, “I take no pleasure in the
death of the wicked.” That’s why the Lord sent the prophets as watchmen in the
first place. If God’s desire was only to destroy the people, then He simply
could’ve done that. But he sent the prophets in advance of the judgment so that the
people might have a chance to repent. He did that as an expression of love.

In the book of Amos God delays the judgment so that the people can hear
the warnings ahead of time. There was always the possibility that if the people
would respond, if the people would listen, if the people would obey and change
their ways, God would relent from sending the judgment. The problem is that, in
the book of Jeremiah, as Jeremiah is preaching this message, the only thing that he
is going to encounter is defiant rebellion. The people will say in chapter 8, “We
are not able. We will not return.” In chapter 44 they retort: “We will continue
preforming our pagan rights.”

But the prophets give us numerous expressions of God’s amazing love for
his people. One of my favorite ones is found in Isaiah chapter 49 verses 14 and
following, and here’s what the people of Israel said, “Zion has said, ‘the Lord has
forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me.’” They were thinking about the exile
and they’ve been defeated by the Babylonians, they’ve been taken away, they’ve
been sent out of the land. Their response was, “God’s forgotten about us. God
doesn’t care about us.” Maybe they were even the feeling: God really can’t do
anything about this, the gods of the Babylon are stronger than the Lord. The Lord
has forsaken me and my Lord has forgotten me. Listen to what God says to his
people in response to that. In verse 15, “Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?” He says, do you
think that it’s possible for me to stop loving my people. Well could a woman stop
loving the baby, the infant that she nurses at her breast? Then the Lord says, even
if that could happen, and we can’t even imagine that at a human level, the Lord
says, “Yet I will not forget you.” He then goes on to say to Zion, “I have engraved
you on palms of my hands.” So the Lord in a sense has a tattoo of his people and
he has Zion on one hand, and he has an image of the city. So that is first image
God always sees. God is always aware of his people. He never forgets them.
They’re never out of his mind. They’re never out of his consciousness.

So the prophets, are messengers of an angry God, but they also remind us
of God’s incredible love. They are precursors that help us to understand what Paul
says in Romans chapter 8, “There is nothing that could ever separate us from the
love of God.” We see the extremes of God’s anger and God’s love, and both of
those things are part of the message of the prophets.

**Misunderstanding #2: Prophets are Simply Predictors of the Future**

I think a second misunderstanding about the prophets is that the prophets
were simply predictors of the future. We might even think of them as crystal ball
gazers who are looking off into the future. Their role, their goal, their mission, and
their message were all about telling us what things were going to be like in the last
days. As a sports fan, I think of the prophets as people who could accurately
predict every game and the outcome and situation ahead of time. It’s important to
understand the prophets were predictors of the future. They were not right 66% of
the time; they were not right 50% of the time; they were not right 95% of the time.
Deuteronomy 18 says that if the Lord sends a prophet and if he makes predictions,
the only way to know that he is a true prophet he has to be right 100% of the time because God is always right. He never lies. He never tells something that is untruthful. So a true prophet of God, as he prophesied the future, always was right. But it is also important to understand that predicting the future was not the primary message or the role of the prophets.

Someone has said that two thirds of the preaching of the prophets was forth-telling, one third of the preaching of the prophets is foretelling. What it means by that is forth-telling is simply preaching, communicating the message of God, telling forth God’s word preaching to the people is two-thirds of the message of the prophets. I believe one of the reasons that we need the prophets in the churches today is that they will preach to the needs, the concerns, the problems in the peoples’ relationship with God at that time. As you get to know the prophets, you understand they were dealing with the same issues, the same problems that we’re dealing with our lives. Two-thirds of the preaching of the prophets is dealing with those kinds of issues just talking to the people about their sin, their need to love God, their need for faith in God. Then one-third of the preaching is foretelling, or predicting the future.

Now, most of those predictions, as we go back to Jeremiah are given more than five hundred years before the time of Jesus. Most of those predictions and those events deal with things that happened in past history. In fact, many of them deal with things that are going to happen in the immediate future before we ever get to the New Testament and to the time of Jesus. Fee and Stewart, in their book, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, give us these statistics: They say that as we look at the prophets, less than two percent of their prophecies are Messianic prophesy, less than five percent of their prophesies deal with a new covenant era, and less than one percent of their prophecies deal with events that are still future.

So many people approach the prophets or they think about the prophets simply in terms of eschatology, or simply in terms of “we want to go to these books and find a road map for the future.” There is very little of that in the
prophets yet. They do have important things to say: God’s kingdom is going to come, God’s Messiah is going to rule and reign, God is going to keep and fulfill his promises. But they are more designed to give us a general picture of what that future is like not to answer all of our questions, not to solve all of the eschatological puzzles and mysteries that are out there. So if we go to the prophets looking for those kinds of answers, we are really looking for things that were not the primary focus of their ministry. Many people think that the primary issue in the prophets is whether you’re pre-millennial, amillennial, postmillennial, pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib, yet there are things that relate to those issues but that’s not going to be the primary thing that we talk about and discuss as we study through them.

When I often tell people that I teach at a seminary and I teach the Old Testament prophets, that often raises many questions. Some of those questions are things like “who do you believe the antichrist is?” or “do you believe that Jesus is coming back in the near future?” “Are we living in the last days after the 9/11 events?” “Was 9/11 prophesied in the Bible?” “Is there anything about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan in the prophets?” “Is there anything in the Bible about that?” And often many people take their Bible, and especially they take the prophets, and they go looking for things that are in today’s newspaper.

As you study the history of the Christian church, you realize that people have been doing this for all of history and they’ve made some huge mistakes in doing so. The mistakes are not in the Bible, the mistakes are in the ways that we deal them and so I believe that there are things here that do inform our understanding of the future.

Jeremiah gives me great hope that God is in control and that God’s kingdom is going to come. Isaiah that the Lord is going to restore his kingdom and Zion is going to be lifted up as the highest of the mountains. Many of the specific things we want to know are things like: who is the antichrist? what’s the future of the United States? what’s going on with the conflict between the West and radical
Islam? what’s going to happen to the nation of Israel that was established in 1948? The prophets simply do not always address those issues. We have to look at their predictions in terms of the things that were going on in their day and in their circumstances.

So we simply don’t go to Jeremiah and pull out verses from Jeremiah and relate them to the great tribulation in the end times. We don’t turn back to the book of Isaiah the way that some popular studies have done recently and say this is about God’s judgment on America. The prophets are talking about God’s judgment on Israel and Judah. They’re dealing with specific things that were going to happen in their time and in their context. So if we go looking for those kinds of answers in the prophets, I think one, we are going to be disappointed, or, two, we are going to end up misrepresenting and misinterpreting the message of the prophets. To be honest, as I look at many of the ways that the prophets are treated in the popular Christian culture, I think we see those kinds of things going on.

**Misunderstanding #3: Prophets Give an Old Covenant Message not Relevant for Us**

There’s a third misunderstanding and this is really what I want the focus of our lesson to be today. The third misunderstanding is that many people believe the prophets where God’s messengers to the people in the Old Testament, under the old covenant. Therefore, their message isn’t really relevant to us today. The prophets came hundreds of years before Jesus. The reality that they were prophesying has already happened, so how could their message be relevant to us today? What I would like us to understand is that instead of thinking about eschatology and our eschatological positions, the prophets primarily asks us to focus on some very important life issues, and things that relate to our relationship with God and to our mission as the church today. One passage that’s constantly reminded me of this is looking over at the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 5, Isaiah describes the culture of Israel and Judah in the 8th century B.C. When I read that passage, in many ways, I understand that he’s addressing a culture that with
all of its differences and with all of the time gap that’s there, it’s a culture that’s very much like where we are at today. He talks about a people who add field to field and are consumed with wealth and possessions. He talks about people who are consumed by pleasure, and they drink wine by the bowlfuls and they’re concerned merely with alcohol and satisfying their pleasure. That’s our culture today in many ways.

He talks about people who are overwhelmed by moral confusion. He says they are people who call good evil, and evil good, and when I watch any television news show or radio call-in show, and people address issues like abortion or homosexuality, I realize we’re living in that kind of culture. Woe to those who call good evil and evil good. When we abandon Scripture, we lose our moral center, and that’s what had happened to those people as well. Isaiah also describes a people that are arrogant and who defied God. They would say, “Hey, look Isaiah, if you’re going to talk about God’s judgment coming on us, let him hurry, let him hasten, let him speed and bring that judgment on.” Isaiah says the Lord is going to hasten, and the Assyrians’ are going to come quickly and when they meet out God’s judgment, it’s going to happen very quickly. So, the culture that the prophets were dealing with there may be huge time gap, but in many ways their culture is very much like ours.

**Three Main Issues the Prophets Address: Idolatry**

As I study the prophets, as I study Jeremiah and look at Jeremiah, in light of the whole corpus of the prophetic literature, there are three major life issues that the prophets specifically address. The first one is that the prophets are going to talk about the problem of idolatry the people have. Instead of worshiping God, they have turned away to the worshiping of other gods. Particularly for Israel, the worship of the Canaanite gods of Baal and of the female fertility goddesses, and all their rites and rituals was something that went on throughout Israel’s history. That was something that was particularly prominent in the days of Jeremiah.

So I would like to look at just a handful of passages that begin to prepare us
to understand Jeremiah, where he’s going to address this issue of idolatry. One of my favorite ones is in Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 13, where Jeremiah is going to use a powerful image. He says this: “my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and they have hued out for themselves, cisterns, broken cisterns that could hold no water.” Now in the world that Jeremiah lived in, cisterns were very important, because rain water and water was precious in Israel. The cisterns were designed to hold that water. Jeremiah compares the idols that the people have turned to as broken cisterns. The things that they need for life is going to leak out, and an idol is really anything we trust in for significance and security other than God himself. On the other hand, the Lord is the fountain of life. He’s where you find the living water. Jesus talked about that in John 4 and John 7, but the people had chosen to worship gods that would ultimately be cracked cisterns. They would look to them for security and significance and blessing, yet those gods would ultimately not produce for them. Jeremiah says the people of Judah have as many idols as they have cities and none of those idols are going to help them. Really in many ways the radical idolatry of the people of Judah was absolutely something that God could not grasp himself. “What other nation,” Jeremiah 2:11, “has ever abandoned its gods.” Well, Israel knows the true God and yet they’ve abandoned him. “Does a bride forget her engagement ring and her ornaments of her wedding? [No] but my people have forgotten me.” So right up front, in Jeremiah chapter 2, one of the first important chapters in the book, the Lord’s going to address the issue of idolatry.

We see the depths of this idolatry, the depravity that it brought about via the pagan rituals that were part of that. These are addressed in Jeremiah chapter 7: 30-36. The Lord says this, “for the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the Lord, they have set their detestable things in the house that is called my name to defile it. They put these idols in the temple. They have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom. To burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command nor did it come into my
mind.” So the Lord says they have not only worshipped other Gods, but they’ve brought images into the temple. They have set up shrines in the valley of Hinnom, which was right outside Jerusalem. They have set up sacred sites to these pagan gods that actually involved, and the rituals that were associated with the worship of these gods actually involved the sacrifice of children; that’s how depraved Israel had become. We read in the historical books that there were kings like Ahaz and Manasseh, who actually sacrificed their own children. Any society that would treat children this way is deplorable in the eyes of God. So that’s what had happened to them as idol worshippers, that’s how much this had crept into their society.

In Jeremiah chapter 10, Jeremiah deals with their idolatry more in a sarcastic way. He makes this statement about the idols in chapter 10 verse 5, he says, “the idols that the people worship are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, they cannot speak and they have to be carried for they cannot walk.” So how many of us would want to bow down to a scarecrow in a cucumber field? That’s what the idols of Israel had become.

So the fact of idolatry, the problem of idolatry, the issue of idolatry is very much throughout the book of Jeremiah. In fact, as we come to the last message that Jeremiah ever preaches in the book of Jeremiah, his final public sermon. In Jeremiah chapter 44, Jeremiah is in Egypt and he’s confronting the refugees that are in Egypt with their pagan practices. He tells them that they need to put those things away, that the Lord is displeased by that. Here’s the response that the people have, they say this, “as for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you.” Now I have preached many sermons, and people have often not listened to me. They very rarely tell me that that’s what they are going to do when they leave after they shake my hand. But that’s what they said to Jeremiah.

Then they say this, “we will do everything that we have vowed. We will make offerings to the queen of heaven,” the fertility gods of Mesopotamia and
Canaan. “We will pour out our drink offerings to her as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials.” We’re not going to stop worshipping idols, and so the book of Jeremiah comes to a stopping point where the Lord has punished them for their idolatry. He sent the judgment of exile, but they still haven’t learned. At the end of the book they are saying, we’re still going to worship our idols. Their understanding of the covenant and of the reality of these gods had become so skewed, that they say, the reason that all of these disasters have happened to us is Josiah carried out these reforms that took away our gods and our pagan practices and that’s why we have experienced all these bad things. So idolatry is a major issue in the book of Jeremiah and in the prophets in general.

**Problem #1: Idolatry**

Now we said that these are major life issues that are related to us, but I have to be honest that as I read the Old Testament, many times when I hear about the sin of idolatry among the people of Israel, I ask the question: how could these people have been so foolish? I’m really glad that I’m informed in ways that they aren’t because I don’t have this problem with idols. I’ve tended to read these prohibitions about idolatry or these condemnations about idolatry and say, you know, there’s a lot of sins in the Bible that I have to deal with but idolatry is pretty much one of those things that I’ve checked off my list. I don’t believe in the worship of false gods, other than the 50 inch TV in my living room, I don’t have images that I bow down to that often. But as I have come to see what the prophets, what the Old Testament really says about idolatry, this is the key life issue that I constantly have to deal with in my life and it’s the key issue that I think all of us deal with as followers of Jesus.

There are a couple passages that have helped me to understand this. In Colossians chapter 3 verse 5, Paul says that covetousness or greed is idolatry. So you may not have images that – you may not give your loyalty to or pray your prayers to gods other than the God of the Bible, but if you have a problem with covetousness, than you’re an idol worshipper. Calvin said that the human heart is
“an idol factory,” and that in our culture, the primary idol that we worship is wealth and possessions. So, there was an idol problem in Jerusalem in the 7th century and the 6th century as Jeremiah was ministering. We still have a problem with idols today.

The primary reason that Baal the god of the Canaanites was such a constant attraction to the people of Israel is that the culture around Israel taught that Baal was the god of the storm. He was the god who brought the rains and blessed them and their crops. He brought fertility. The goddesses associated with him would enable their wives to bear children. In other words, these gods promised prosperity, without the moral requirements that God had placed on his people. That was a huge attraction. So in our society, as we think of materialism, as we think of wealth, as we think of possession’s, we need to see beyond those as just being material things. There is a spiritual issue associated with that because wealth and possessions can become an idol when we look to them as our source of security and significance especially when we give love, devotion, and worship to those things that belongs only to God. We definitely have the same issue in our society. Job 31, when Job is protesting his innocence before God, he gives a long list of sins that he’s not committed. He says that he has not trusted in gold or in his wealth, and he equates that with the pagan rites of kissing toward the sun and the moon or bowing toward the gods. In other words, loving wealth and loving possessions as your ultimate is just as pagan as bowing down to an image. The Old Testament helps us also see that idolatry is essentially when we give in to the lies of the culture.

The people of Israel, they had the truth. The people of Israel, they knew the true God, but all around them there was a culture that had another story. It was the story of Baal and the Canaanite gods and how those gods could provide the security, wealth, blessing, joy, and happiness in life that the Israelites were looking for. The Israelites gave in to idolatry when they bought that alternative story. As a Christian I often find myself buying the alternative story of our culture about
pleasure, wealth, possessions, success, wealth, career, or any of those things, when we believe those lies, we’re giving in to the same kind of idolatry that the people of Israel did.

Another passage that’s helped me with this is Ezekiel chapter 14. When the prophet Ezekiel comes to confront the people of Judah with their idolatry, he doesn’t simply say, “You have a problem because you’ve built, constructed and bowed down to these idols.” He says “The real issue is, you have built these idols and you have put these images in your heart.” So I may not have a physical image or an alternative religious system that I give my loyalty to, but anything in my heart that takes away from my absolute love, devotion, and service to God that becomes an idol. So, for the Old Testament prophets the life issue that they are addressing with the people again and again was an issue of idolatry, and it’s relevant to us today as well.

**Problem # 2 Social Injustice**

There’s a second major life issue in the Prophets, and it’s the issue of social injustice. Again it was a direct corollary of their greed and idolatry. When you worship and love money, you can become desperate enough to get it in any way that you can. Ultimately, if that meant ripping off your neighbors, mistreating them, not living up to the covenant commands that God had given to you, then that was part of the problem. It also was related to their idolatry. When Israel worshipped the true God, who was a God of compassion, a God who considered those that were living in slavery in Egypt and delivered them out of their bondage, when you worship that kind of God, it develops a certain attitude toward the poor and the needy. When you worship the gods of Canaan, who established their power by violence, by killing, by abusing others, and by taking what they want - in many ways the Canaanite gods are just human beings enlargee, with all of their problems, their lust, and their sins. When you worship those kinds of gods, it justifies you doing those same things in the human realm.
So, the prophets taught a great deal about the fact that Israel was not living out its covenant responsibilities to care for the poor and the needy. They had become wrapped up in their own greed. That was an absolute contrast to the kind of society that God had designed Israel to be. The kings of Israel and Judah had contributed to this, by taking land from the people, and by subsuming everything under their power and their wealth, and all of this was going on. When the prophets first come on the scene in the eighth century, Israel has experienced some of the greatest prosperity they had ever enjoyed. All of that has ended up in a society where people do not care for each other, and where they are not treating each other in the way that God has designed.

In Deuteronomy 15, the Lord says, “The poor will always be among you.” That’s the reality. But in Deuteronomy 15, verse 11, “I have given you these laws so that there will be no poor among you.” That was the ideal. God knew that there were always going to be poor people, there were always going to be inequities, but the Lord wanted Israel to be a society where social injustice did not happen. So, the Old Testament law gives us laws like this.

In Exodus 22, if you give a loan to your neighbor, and he has to give his cloak to you as a pledge that he will pay it back, make sure that every night you return his cloak to him so that he doesn’t get cold as he’s sleeping at night. Deuteronomy 15:1: “Cancel the debts that are in the land every seven years.” I know many of my students who have taken student loans would like to see that practiced today. Deuteronomy 23: Don’t charge interest on loans that you give to your fellow Israelites. Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 24: Allow the poor people to come into your fields to glean in the corners and to take the excess because you don’t need it all. Deuteronomy chapter 15: You are to release your slaves, the Hebrew debt servants, every seven years. When we come to Jeremiah chapter 34 and 35, we’re going to learn that the people of Judah had not been living by that commandment. Deuteronomy 24: Don’t take advantage of the poor and the needy. Deuteronomy 10, verse 18: look after the widows and orphans. Leviticus chapter
25: If your poor relative is in need, buy him out of debt, or restore his property that he’s had to sell. Leviticus 25 also says there’s a year of jubilee every fifty years, where everything returns to its original owner, and every debt is canceled. That is part of the ethic of the Old Testament.

David Baker, in his book, *Tight Fist or Open Hands*, reminds us of how the Old Testament law is not just another ancient Near Eastern law code. In many ways, these concerns for the poor and the needy were specially emphasized in Israel. Even if they were not absolutely unique, there were provisions in the law that God gave through Moses that makes it completely distinct from anything else that’s in the culture of the Old Testament. The prophets are calling the people back to that kind of ethical responsibility.

So again, to go along with the message of Jeremiah, let me just highlight some of the passages where we see this. Isaiah chapter 5, verses 8-10, I’ve already mentioned this passage earlier in the lesson): “Woe to those who join house to house and field to field until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing, ‘Surely the many houses will be made desolate, large and beautiful houses without inhabitants. For ten acres of a vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.’”

They had taken advantage of the poor; they had used debts and loans in many ways to acquire the lands of those that were in need. God says I’m going to take away those lands that you’ve stolen from others. Amos chapter 2 says that the wicked in the land “sell the poor for a pair of sandals.” A father and his son commit sexual immorality with the same slave girl. They lie down on the cloak that they have taken from their neighbor as they come into the house of God to worship him. Remember the passage in Exodus that said they were to return that? They were worshipping God with stolen goods.

In Jeremiah chapter 7, in Jeremiah’s famous temple sermon, Jeremiah reminds the people, “Look. If you want to live in the land, if you want to enjoy the
blessings of the covenant, then you need to fulfill your responsibilities to your neighbors.” Jeremiah actually takes the Ten Commandments and flips them. He talks about the second half of the Commandments first, and the first half of the Commandments second, in order to stress the importance of social justice.

One of my favorite images in the Prophets is in Micah chapter 3. Micah says the wicked, the wealthy, and the leaders of Judah have become like those who take their people and chop them up in a pot. They cook them, and they eat them for dinner. Obviously, Judah was not practicing cannibalism. But what the Lord was saying, by doing these things where you extort the poor, you take their land, you steal their livelihood, you deprive them of enjoying the things that God had given to them. It was their heritage. You have become just as bad as cannibals. As a result of that the people could not come into the presence of God, worship him, pretend to love him, sacrifice and do all of these things while they were mistreating the poor.

In the Christian church today, in American evangelicalism, we are becoming more and more aware of the fact that our gospel ministry also includes a social ministry. There’s been a history where conservative evangelicalism particularly has not wanted to associate with the social gospel. As a result of that we have often forgotten about the responsibilities that God has given to us as part of not just a subsidiary ministry of the church, but our calling to take care of the poor and the needy, to meet people’s physical needs as part of our ministry of the gospel. I’m thankful that we are being reawakened to that. David Platt’s book Radical has reminded us of those responsibilities.

The problem is that in many ways I believe the reason the church has neglected these responsibilities is that we have neglected the Prophets. And if we were teaching the Mosaic Law in our churches, if we were preaching the Old Testament prophets to our children, we wouldn’t forget about these responsibilities because they are absolutely central to what we do as God’s people.
They never take the place of Gospel ministry and they don’t substitute for bad theology, but they’re part of our mission and our calling in the church.

Remember that passage in Deuteronomy 15? God’s design for Israel was that there was to be no poor among the people of God. Now if you think that that is simply from the Old Testament or that it’s simply for Israel, I’m going to remind you of a picture that God gives us of the early church in Acts chapter four. It says that those who had more than they needed sold what they had and gave it to those that were in need. There were no poor among the people in the early church. I have to feel that Luke in that passage is alluding back to Deuteronomy 15. The people that Israel had failed to be and had failed to become, in this new Israel that God was establishing, the Lord was enabling that to become a reality. In our churches and in our communities, the Lord wants us to be a representation of a new Israel as well. Israel was a paradigm of what God’s people were supposed to look like: “there will be no poor among you.” They were fulfilling that in the early church because they understood that part of their responsibility.

**Problem #3: False Worship**

There’s a third and final, and really, it’s a related life issue, the third issue that the Israelites are going to deal with is the problem of false worship. The problem of false worship, and in many ways, in our churches today, many of the battles that Christians have with each other are over issues of worship and many times it’s about preaching style, what our sanctuaries should look like, music, and the style of worship. Those are really external issues.

The prophets are going to deal more with the specific heart of worship, and the issue that the prophets are going to bring again and again is that the rituals, the sacrifices, the music, and the prayers that the people of God were offering to the Lord were unacceptable to him. The reason that they were unacceptable was not simply that they were just going through the motions, it had just become a ritual. The reason they were unacceptable is that there was not a lifestyle behind the practices and the rituals. So often throughout the Prophets they are going to
address the issue, that the Lord is not pleased by the sacrifices that you’re offering. The Lord is not as interested in the rituals that you go through. He is more interested in an obedient lifestyle to go along with that worship. In contrast to the gods of the ancient Near East, the Prophets remind us, the God of Israel could not be manipulated by rituals and sacrifices. Often in these ancient Near Eastern religions when a catastrophe would happen they would try to go to the temple or to the priest and find out, what did we do to offend the gods. Maybe if we offer the gods more meat, or more beer, or more wine, or we’ll just -- they’ll be happy with us. But what the prophets are going to say is God cannot be manipulated by rituals and sacrifices. You can’t go to the temple on the cloak of the garment that you’ve taken from your neighbor as a pledge in violation of the law and offer God sacrifices and prayers.

In Isaiah one, the prophet Isaiah says, “you lift up your hands in prayer to God, but your hands are covered with blood,” and the Lord says, “stop the useless bringing of sacrifices and trampling of my courts. I don’t even want to listen to your prayers anymore, because I don’t hear your words, I see your hands.” Micah 6, one of the great passages in the prophets: “What does God want from us as his people? Should we bring him lavish sacrifices, rivers of oil, hundreds and thousands of animals? Is that what pleases God?” The answer is: No. Should we bring him our first-born child and maybe make the supreme sacrifice that many of these pagan worshipers did. That’s not what God wants either. God desires from his people that they “do justice, they love mercy, and they walk humbly before God.” The prophet Amos says, “I hate your music, I hate your sacrifices, I hate your rituals; let justice flow like a river.”

And Jeremiah is going to address this issue in chapter seven verses 21 to 23, and we’ll come back to that passage. But the Lord says, comparatively speaking, when I gave you the law, the primary focus wasn’t the commands about rituals and sacrifices, it was about obedience. When you offer your burnt offerings, you might as well eat the meat because your offerings are useless. The
prophets were not opposed to the rituals, and it was an earlier understanding of the prophets that they were the beginners of ethical monotheism and that they repudiated all the rituals. The prophets emphasized the rituals as well, because they were part of obedience to God. God had established these sacrifices, God had established these practices, but the practices apart from a lifestyle were not what God desired.

Summary

So as we look at the message of the prophets, these three things are going to coalesce together. There’s an emphasis on idolatry and the problem of looking to anything other than God as our ultimate source of security or devotion. There is a problem of social justice and how the people were not living out their responsibilities, not just to God but to each other. And finally, there’s an issue of false worship: coming to God without the right kind of heart and the right kind of lifestyle.

So as we think about worship in light of the prophets, it’s not just an issue of: What kind of music do we play? What’s your liturgy like? What’s your ritual like? The question that the prophets will ask us: what’s your life like? Is your heart in line with what God desires? Do you love God with all of your heart, or are you in some way, is your commitment to him being corrupted by a desire and a love for idols? John says, “keep your heart from idols,” and we’re going to be reminded of that, as well, as we look through the Prophets and as we study the book of Jeremiah together.
One of the important things for understanding any biblical book is to understand the historical setting and context of that book. In many ways, it gives us the plain feel of how God is interacting with people, what the message is all about. I think it’s especially important as we’re studying the prophets and Jeremiah to understand what was the situation in Jeremiah’s life. What historical circumstances were going on? It’s critical in understanding his message. Many times when people are studying the Bible today we begin with the very pragmatic question. We want to know what does the text mean to me; but it’s more important to begin with the foundational question that really is prior to that: what does the text mean? Important to understanding that is the historical context in which that message is delivered.

Many people when they would talk about their favorite verses in the Bible or maybe their life verses point to Jeremiah 29:11, “I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper you and to give you a future.” But many people don’t really understand what that verse is all about because they don’t understand the historical context. They think that it’s a general promise that God is going to make them prosperous, successful, and that everything in their life is going to turn out exactly as they want. But Jeremiah 29 was actually written to the exiles that were in Babylon. Jeremiah was giving this promise to those people but also telling them that they were going to live in exile for seventy years. So prosperity for them did not involve everything turning out the way they wanted. It involved seventy years of judgment. The things that would happen there were for their good. Ultimately there would be the restoration of their children and generations down the line. So it’s important to understand historical context.
There’s been a recent study on the book of Isaiah that has taken a verse out of the book of Isaiah and viewed that as a passage that is unfolding the judgment of America. Again, those kinds of treatments of biblical prophecy are very popular. They tend to sell books and videos but they ignore historical context. So we have to understand Jeremiah, in light of the Babylonian crisis and the fact that God had raised up the Babylonians to bring judgment against the people of Judah. In a sense, what was going to happen was that God was going to tear down the old world of Israel though this judgment, but God was going to raise up something in the future that would provide a hope.

Jeremiah and the Deuteronomy 28 Background

The international background of Jeremiah’s message and ministry, that’s going to be the focus of our session in this hour, I want to go back to Deuteronomy 28. In Deuteronomy 28, again, laying out the covenant curses and the covenant blessings that Israel would experience if they kept God’s laws and God’s commandments, here was one of the curses that God had warned against them. He said, “the Lord will bring a nation against you from far away from the end of the earth swooping down like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard faced nation who shall not respect the older and have mercy on the young. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle, the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed. It will not leave you grain or wine or oil the increase of your herds or the young of your flock until you are caused to perish.” He goes on to say in this passage that Israel would even be reduced to cannibalism as they try to deal with the horrors of war and siege.

Also, part of those curses involved the threat of exile that they would be driven out of the promise land and taken away. Verse 64 says, “and the Lord will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other and there you shall serve other gods of wood or of stone which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite and there will be no resting place for the sole of your foot but the Lord will give you there a trembling
heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you, night and day shall be dread and you will have no assurance of life. In the morning you shall say if only it were evening and in the evening you say if only it were morning because of the dread that your heart shall feel and the sights that your eyes shall see. And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promise that you should never take again.” So God warned them that if they were disobedient, he would drive them out of the promised land. Salvation history would be reversed and they would end up going back to Egypt.

Assyrian Exile and God’s International Sovereignty

In Jeremiah’s day that’s exactly what’s going on. Before the time of Jeremiah, the Lord raised up the first wave of writing prophets, the classical prophets, to announce to the people of Israel and Judah that God was prepared to send them into exile. The nation that God was using to do this was Assyria. The Assyrians ultimately took the Northern Kingdom of Israel away into exile in 722. They caused tremendous suffering and oppression for the Southern Kingdom of Judah as well. The prophets in the Old Testament remind us that this was not just a military crisis or a political event, it was also primarily a spiritual crisis. The Lord was raising up these nations. The Lord was directing these movements of troops as a judgment against the people for their disobedience. So God, raised up the imperial power of Assyria and the prophet Isaiah says that Assyria was the rod of God’s anger. They were executing God’s judgment.

Paul Gilkor says that Israel’s apostasy was the catalyst of Assyrian imperialism. It wasn’t just a political event, it wasn’t just a military crisis; God was orchestrating the affairs of these nations and these armies and their movements to ultimately accomplish his purposes. Someone said that one of the greatest comforts from reading the prophets is coming to an understanding that God is in control of the international scene. If God directed, controlled, and superintended what happened to kings and their nations and their armies and movements in the ancient Near East then the same thing is true if we look at the
international scene today. God’s power has not diminished. There has not been a transfer of power; God has not given that over to humans. God controls the events that are in the world and God was using these nations to bring judgment on the people of Israel and Judah.

**Ascendancy of Babylon**

In Jeremiah’s day, we begin to have a transfer from the Assyrians to the Babylonians. The Babylonians are Assyria’s rival in the southern part of Mesopotamia. There was always conflict between them and in the same year that Jeremiah was called as a prophet 626 BC the 13th year of Josiah, a man by the name of Nabopolassar became king of Babylon. Three years later, in 623, he declared Babylon’s independence and was actually able to accomplish it by driving the Assyrians out of Babylon. As a result of this, he established the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Nabopolassar was the father of Nebuchadnezzar. In the early stages of his ministry, Jeremiah warned the people that God was preparing to send an enemy from the north. In the book of Jeremiah that enemy is not specifically identified as Babylon until we get to Jeremiah chapter 20. Now we don’t know, did Jeremiah know the identity of this army? Did he know the nation that was going to attack Israel?

We don’t know, but we can see at the very beginning of his ministry God was preparing the Neo-Babylonian Empire for the role that it was going to play in biblical history. Jeremiah will later say that Babylon was the hammer of the entire earth. God was the one who was using them as his tool to accomplish his purposes. So as Nabopolassar established his empire and we see the decline and the fall of the Assyrian empire in 614. The Babylonians and the Medes joined together and defeated the Assyrians and brought about the fall of their capital, Asher.

In 612, the next Assyrian center to fall to the Babylonians and the Medes was Nineveh. It was the city where Jonah had prophesied to and it was the city that Nahum prophesied that God would bring judgment against because of the
cruelty of the Assyrians. Finally, in 609, the final blow to the Assyrians took place at Huran. Judah’s King Josiah had actually been killed at Megiddo that year as he was trying to stop the Egyptians from marching north to help prop up the Assyrian empire. Josiah believed that the Babylonian empire and their rise was going to enable him to finally bring about Judah’s independence and so he supported the rise of this new empire. He was killed trying to stop the Egyptians. The Egyptians were actually unable to help the Assyrians and Babylon defeated them and really that was the end of the Assyrian empire.

Finally, in 605, the decisive battle that established Babylon as the dominate power in the ancient Near East took place in Syria, to the north of Israel, at a place called Carchemish when Nabopolassar’s son Nebuchadnezzar when his armies defeated the Egyptians and whatever may have been left of the Assyrians at the time. From that point forward, all of Syria-Palestine was going to come under Neo-Babylonian control.

Israelite King Deported to Babylon

After he won the victory and pushed the Egyptians back to their homeland, Nebuchadnezzar came south and basically took control all of Hattiland or Syro-Palestine. In 605 BC he took away the first group of Judean exiles including Daniel and a small group of wealthy influential young people. They would be take away from Judah, trained in the language, theology, culture, beliefs, practices of the Babylonians and then sent back to rule over their people. That was the first wave of the Babylonian exile [605 BC]. While he was in Syro-Palestine in 605 Nebuchadnezzar also received news that his father had died and so he had to rush back to Mesopotamia, to Babylon, to assert his control over the throne.

The first wave of exiles in Judah were taken at that time as well, and from this point forward basically what would happen every year is that Nebuchadnezzar and his troops they would march west into Syria-Palestine and they would collect tribute. Judah was now a vassal of Babylon and they would answer to Babylon. Before the time that Babylon had taken control, the Assyrians had been the
dominate power but now Judah would have to pay tribute and give their loyalties to Babylon.

The second wave of the deportation, the second wave of exile, took place in 597 BC and during this time between 605 and 597 particularly a king of Judah by the name of Jehoakim had wavered back and forth between giving his loyalties to Egypt or to Babylon. Jehoakim in some sense was hoping he could play the Egyptians off against the Babylonians and he was constantly waging the alternative possibility of rebellion against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar finally tired of this in 602. He took Jehoakim into shackles and bonds. He took him back. He was prepared to take him back to Babylon as a prisoner. Jehoakim affirmed his loyalty to Babylon and he released him and allowed him to remain on the throne. In 598, he rebelled again. Nebuchadnezzar and his troops marched to Judah to take care of this problem. Before they actually took the city of Jerusalem, Jehoakim was dead. He may have been killed by his own people.

There was a new king on the throne by the name of Jehoiachin but Nebuchadnezzar and his troops took the city of Jerusalem at this time and they took the second wave of exiles back to back to Babylon. He took the king off the throne Jehoiachin only eighteen years old and only been on the throne for three months. He took him back as a prisoner. There was a larger wave of exiles that were also part of the deportation and the most famous of these exiles was the prophet Ezekiel. Four or five years later after Ezekiel had been taken away in exile he would be called by God to be a prophet to the exiles who were in Babylon. Jeremiah was the voice of God and the prophet of God to the people that were still in the land dealing with those various waves of deportation. How do we respond to this? How do we respond to the Babylonians? What is God doing in the midst of this? Ezekiel and Daniel would be prophetic voices to the people that were living at exile during this time but that was the deportation of 597 BC.

One of the interesting things from extra-biblical history is that the actual Babylon capture of the city of Jerusalem is attested for us in the Babylonian
Chronicles themselves. The Babylonian Chronicles give us the key events of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. Where he went, where he marched, where he took his troops, and the tribute he received. In the accounts for the years 598 and 597 we have a record of the capture of the city of Jerusalem. The Babylonian account of this is: “In the month of Kislev [which was December 598] the king of Babylonia mobilized his troop and marched to the west. He encamped against the city of Judah, Jerusalem, and on the second of Adar, [which was March 16, 597]. He captured the city and seized its king. A king of his choice he appointed there. He took its heavy tribute and carried it off to Babylon.” So the account that we read in the Babylonian Chronicles is exactly the same as what we read in the biblical record and you can read the stories of that in 2 Kings 24:10-17.

King Zedekiah

In the book of Jeremiah, we have a narrative of the captive of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 597 BC. The final appendix to the book of Jeremiah is another account that is very similar to 2 Kings 25 that again gives us the story of the capture of Jerusalem. This was a central event. Now when Nebuchadnezzar captured the city the second time he did not destroy the city. He did not bring an end to the government in Judah. In fact, what he did was he placed another king from the line of David on the throne and that king’s name was Zedekiah. Zedekiah would become the final king of Judah and Zedekiah was basically set up by the Babylonians as their puppet. He was to give his loyalty to the Babylonians. He was to pay tribute to the Babylonians. He was to make sure that there was no military or armed resistance. In other words, he was there to protect the interests of the Babylonians. The problem is that as Zedekiah became king, he began to listen to his advisors, to military officers that were encouraging him to rebel and to resist Babylonian hegemony. Jeremiah was telling Zedekiah the only way you can survive this is to submit to the Babylonians and pay your tribute to them, and
recognize that at this time in our history God has raised up the Babylonians as an instrument of judgment.

In the earlier days of Jeremiah’s ministry, Jeremiah had told the people you can repent and be spared of judgment or you can continue in your sinful ways and be destroyed. They had a chance early in Jeremiah’s ministry to avoid domination by another nation. But at this point, in time after the conquest of Jerusalem in 597, Jeremiah told the king the only option you have is surrender to Babylon or be destroyed. We learn both from Kings, Jeremiah, and Chronicles as we read about Zedekiah that he was a very weak ruler, and ultimately he made the decision to rebel against Babylon the same mistake that Jehoiakim had made that led to the second invasion of Babylon. He made the mistake of rebelling against the Babylonians and the Babylonians were going to return to Jerusalem again. So Nebuchadnezzar brings his troops there’s going to be an invasion and there’s going to be a major onslaught of the land of Judah by the Babylonians. Jeremiah again is advising the king. We see Zedekiah is this weak ruler who is constantly bringing Jeremiah in for conference, or constantly consulting and seeking advice from Jeremiah and asking Jeremiah “what should I do?” or “Will you pray for us that God will deliver us? Jeremiah is consistently going to tell them surrender or be destroyed.

Final Days of Zedekiah

When the Babylonian army begins to capture the cities of Judah, we come to a point where there are only three cities that are left, Azekah, Lachish, and Jerusalem. Jeremiah is continuing to say, “surrender or be destroyed.” On the other hand, there are military officers, there are military advisors, who absolutely hate Jeremiah because they are continuing to advise armed resistance to the Babylonians. They’re going to say, “Look, Jeremiah is weakening the hands of our soldiers.” They’re going to do everything that they can to keep Jeremiah confined in prison away from the people where he cannot influence them with the message that they basically view as treason. Zedekiah is going to go back and forth, “do I
listen to Jeremiah?” or “do I listen to my military officers?” He asked Jeremiah to pray for him, he asked Jeremiah to advise him and then he sends him back to prison. On one occasion the military officers are so angry at Jeremiah they throw him in a cistern they leave him there to die. Zedekiah allows this to happen until another officer convinces him he needed to get the prophet out of the cistern. So Zedekiah is a man who is incredibly torn between these two options and ultimately he makes the choice to rebel and resist.

The Babylonians this time are going to take Jerusalem again, and again this is the capture of Jerusalem that we have in Jeremiah 39 and Jeremiah 52. After they capture the city, they’re going to come back a month later and they’re going to knock down walls and they’re going to destroy the temple, They’re going to burn the city with fire. Zedekiah tried by night to flee away with his family when the Babylonians captured the city. He did not get far. He was captured in the plains of Jericho he was taken to Riblah, Syria and he ultimately was taken back to Babylon as a prisoner. His sons were executed in front of him, and the last thing that Zedekiah saw was the murder or the execution of his sons and then the Babylonians gouged out his eyes and took him as a prisoner.

So that’s the crises that God raises Jeremiah up for. In the beginning of the crises you have an option, you can repent, you can come back to God, you can be restored to him, you can change your ways. If you do that you can avoid the judgment of this invasion from this army that is waiting to attack you. God will relent. There’s a real chance to repent of their decisions, their choices. Their responses to God are going to matter, but once the rebellion and the resistance sets in, once, in 598, Jehoiakim decided to rebel, to resist the Babylonian rule the choice at that point until the time that the city is destroyed in 586 is going to be one of either submit or be destroyed. Sadly the king of Judah and the final leaders in the land made the choice not to listen to God, not to listen to the prophet, and to continue with the resistance of rebellion.

Lachish Letters
We have another extra-biblical document that helps us to understand some of the historical context and setting of what it must’ve been like to live in Judah during this time. Those documents are called the Lachish letters, and the Lachish letters are a series of communications between the military commander in the city of Lachish, which was in Judah about 25 miles away from Jerusalem. It was a fortress city designed to protect Jerusalem from the invasion and the commander that’s in Jerusalem. They are dealing with the problem of this army that’s beginning to put pressure on both Lachish and Jerusalem. The cities of Jerusalem are falling one by one. There’s a mention in these letters of a prophet who was talking to the people, we don’t know if it’s Jeremiah or not. There’s a mention of the name of the commander at Lachish his name was Joash.

Final Context of Jeremiah’s Ministry: Judah to Egypt

There are references about the king sending men down to Egypt and it has a striking parallel with how Jehoiakim is going to send men down to Egypt to bring about the murder of the prophet Uriah. There is a complaint in one of the letters that there are military officers that are weakening the hands of the troops, which is exactly the same thing that is said about Jeremiah in chapter 38. Then in chapter 34 verse 7 in Jeremiah, there’s a mention that the only three cities of Judah that are left standing are Lachish, Azekah, and Jerusalem. In one of the Lachish letters the commanders going to say the light the signifier indicating the security of Azekah that our troops are still there the signifier is no longer burning and so we can imagine the possibility that the city of Azekah that is still standing in Jeremiah 34 is actually fallen in that particular letter and the vice is continuing to squeeze on the city of Jerusalem. Ultimately the city was captured and destroyed.

After the city of Jerusalem was captured, the Babylonians released Jeremiah from prison. So the captivity of Jerusalem and the exile of Judah actually brought about Jeremiah’s freedom. The Babylonians gave Jeremiah two choices, they said that he could accompany them to Babylon but what they advised and recommended them to do was to stay in the land and to be an assistant and to help
Gedaliah who was a man in Judah who had been appointed by the Babylonians as the governor of the land. Ultimately, Jeremiah made the choice to stay in the land with the poor people that were there. I think in some sense that reflects Jeremiah’s heart for ministry and his love for the people. For Jeremiah it would’ve been easier to go to Babylon.

The Babylonians knew that he had basically preached a favorable message about them. He was encouraging surrender, so they would’ve treated him favorably. But Jeremiah made the choice that he felt would be better for the people themselves to remain with the poor people in the land to minister there, and to help and to encourage Gedaliah. Gedaliah was part of a family that was supportive of Jeremiah. He told the people as the governor of Judah the same thing Jeremiah had said. He said settle down, serve the Babylonians, submit to their authority and God will watch over you and take care of you, and as we see things beginning to happen after the fall of Jerusalem in Jeremiah chapter 39 that’s basically what happens. The refugees begin to come back to the land, they begin to harvest the crops good things are happening but there’s another rebellion.

Overthrow of Gedaliah

There’s another resistance led by a man named Ishmael who is part of the family David and in this rebellion Gedaliah was assassinated. As a result of this in 582 BC there is a fourth deportation where more citizens, more people of Gedaliah were taken away from Babylon. So the Babylonians exile is not just one event. There is a deportation in 605, there is a larger wave of exiles in 597, there’s the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem in 586 and more exiles were taken away and even after Gedaliah had basically become a Babylonian providence. There is a fourth deportation in 582. Now as a result of the assassination Gedaliah, Jeremiah himself is ultimately kidnapped and taken away to Egypt. He’s taken there by a group of Gedaliah’s military officers and one of them is Johanan he is the leader of this group and they believe that the best course of action is to flee from
Jerusalem to somehow get away from the Babylonian reprisals that are going to come from the assassination of Gedaliah.

So, Jeremiah is taken away and the final context of Jeremiah’s ministry is best we can tell is that Jeremiah spends the rest of his ministry as a refugee in Egypt and he’s preaching there along with his scribe and his assistant Baruch. He’s ministering to the people and continuing in their worship of idols their rebellion to God. Jeremiah is preaching to them and calling them back to the covenant and reminding them that this catastrophe, this disaster, all of these things, have happened because of God’s judgment and the covenant curses. As I read the whole story of what happened to Judah during the time of Jeremiah I am reminded of the principle of sowing and reaping in Galatian’s chapter 6. In Galatian’s it says, “whatever we sow, we will also reap.” I can definitely see that in the history Israel and Judah.

The book of Hosea says Israel sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind and the whirlwind is going to be these military disasters: First the Assyrian army and then the Babylonians. God took his covenant very seriously. God has planted the concept of sowing and reaping into the creation itself. It’s part of the way God has designed the world to operate. But God has also planted that concept into the covenant. The Lord has established the covenant curse that you will experience if you disobey. God uses military defeat and disaster and that happened to Israel is 722 it happened to Jerusalem in 587. That’s the historical context of Jeremiah’s ministry. The intentional sins are the kinds of things that Jeremiah is having to deal with God raised him up in the finals days of Judah which was perhaps the most desperate time in Israel’s entire history and that is the context of Jeremiah’s ministry.
Jeremiah and Babylon

Now as a result of that what I would like to conclude this lesson by focusing in on: What specifically did Jeremiah say about the Babylonians? What was Jeremiah’s perspective on the Babylonian crisis and Walter Brueggemann reminds us that Jeremiah does not just give us a political perspective he gives us a theological-political perspective because God is the one who is in control in the situation. God is the one who is bringing this judgment to the people of Judah. Here’s a couple of things about Jeremiah’s perspective on the Babylonians crisis.

**Jeremiah’s Message to Israel: God is Fighting against Israel**

Jeremiah is going to tell the leaders and the people of Judah that God is fighting with the Babylonians. Now I want you to think about what that must have sounded like to his own country our enemy God is fighting with them. So in Jeremiah 21 verses 3-7 here’s what Jeremiah has to say, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls. And I will bring them together into the midst of the city. I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath. And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast.’” Verse 7, “Afterward, declares the Lord, I will give Zedekiah, king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

One of the things you should hear in that passage is the repeated occurrence of the first person. It’s not just the Babylonians that are fighting against Israel, it’s the Lord Himself. God is sovereign over this situation, God is moving these armies as chest pieces to accomplish his purposes. Remember Isaiah 10, Assyria is the club or rod of God’s anger. Later on when God raises up Cyrus, in Isaiah 45 its going to say Cyrus is God’s shepherd. It’s even going to say he is God’s “anointed one” and that doesn’t mean Cyrus had a personal relationship with the Lord it simply means God was using these kings to accomplish his purposes.
Now when Jeremiah envisioned Nebuchadnezzar fighting against the city of Jerusalem, what he’s also doing is he’s taken the holy war traditions of Israel and turning them upside down. We also have all kinds of stories in the Old Testament where God would fight battles on behalf of his people. God defeated the Egyptians and brought them out by the exodus; that’s holy war. God had enabled Israel the conquest of the promise land by bringing down the walls of Jericho winning that battle. There are times when David goes into battle and David can hear the troops of the armies of the Lord moving in the trees above him. Jehoshaphat goes into battle one time and God gives him the unusual command to allow the Lord to fight the battle and all Israel has to do is to sing the enemy to death. God fights Israel’s battles for them but in this situation God is on the other side. Imagine if you’re a baseball fan this is like your favorite player is a free agent, he’s no longer playing for the Red Sox he’s playing for the hated Yankees. God has put on another uniform; God is fighting for someone else. You can imagine why Jeremiah was not a terribly popular man with the military officials that were in the land of Judah.

**Jeremiah’s Second Message: Nebuchadnezzar is God’s Servant**

There’s a second thing. Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 25:9 and in Jeremiah chapter 27:6. Jeremiah is going to say Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant. That term is used many other places to talk about many other people like Moses or David or the prophets. Throughout the history in the Old Testament God was working through the descendants of David. They were his vice regions; they were his servants; they were his sons. But now God is working through a foreign king and Nebuchadnezzar, not David, has become God’s servant.

Again it’s very similar to what Isaiah says about Cyrus, “Cyrus is my shepherd,” or “Cyrus is my anointed one.” Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant and as a result of that God is going to give Judah and the other nations into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. There’s a place in chapter 27 where God says he has giving both nations and even the animals of the earth into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.
Nebuchadnezzar is become like a second Adam and he is the one who is going to rule over the earth temporarily.

**Jeremiah’s Third Message: It’s going to be 70 in Babylon**

A third thing that Jeremiah says chap 25 verses 11-12 and chapter 29 verse 10 is that the exile will last for 70 years. There’s some discussion and debate about this whether it’s a literal number. I think that it is more of just a random figure but what it symbolizes is an entire life time. The people who are taken into exile will not, for the most part, be the ones who will be brought back into exile.

They're going to be taken down to Babylon, they'll live, and they'll die. It will be their children, it will be the next generation that returns. It’s very similar to what happens in the wilderness during the days of the exodus. The generation that comes out of Egypt is not going to be the generation that goes into the land. In the same way the generation that’s taken away into exile is not going to be the generation that returns. The reason this is especially significant is that there are prophets all around Judah in 597, when the second wave of exiles have been taken away and their message was in a very short period of time, God is going to bring back the exiles and the vessels of the temple that Nebuchadnezzar took away when he captured Jerusalem in 597. In a short time, those things are going to be brought back to Jerusalem. Jeremiah's message was, that’s not going to happen in a short time. Hananiah the prophet says in two years this disaster is going to come to an end. Now if you were living in Judah between 597 and 586, which prophet would you prefer to hear the prophet who said we’re going to experience seventy years of disaster or the prophet who said this will all be over in two years? The leaders and the people bought the lie of the false prophets who were saying, “Look, this exile is only going to be for a short time.” Jeremiah says, “No, this is going to be a long time.”

**Jeremiah’s Fourth Message: It is Futile to Resist Babylon**

Number four, Jeremiah is going to say, it is futile to resist Babylon or to
continue the armed resistance against them. You will not be successful. You will not be able to fight them off.

Israel's problem, Judah’s problem, was not a military problem, it was a spiritual problem. Even if some-how they had been able to hold off or to thwart the Babylonians, if some-how they could have convinced the Egyptians to wage war on the Babylonians, none of those military options were ever going to work. So this is why the military commanders are angry. This is why in Jeremiah chapter 38 they come to the king and they say this, “Listen to what Jeremiah is saying. He is saying that he who stays in this city shall die by the sword by famine and by pestilence, but he who goes out the Chaldeans shall live; he shall have his life as a prize of war and he shall live.” So, in their minds and in their eyes, Jeremiah is a traitor because Jeremiah is saying surrender to the Babylonians. I remember during the Vietnam war people looking at Jane Fonda and referring to her as Hanoi Jane because they thought that she was saying things that comforted the enemy. In many ways that’s exactly what the military officers in Jeremiah's day thought about him.

Jeremiah says, “It’s futile to continue the resistance against Babylon.” In chapter 27, there is a political conference in Jerusalem that took place in the years 593 to 592. Again, it’s between the second deportation and the last deportation. In this political conference, the nations that have surrounded Judah come to meet with king Zedekiah and they are planning their strategy for how to coexist together, how to align together, so that they can stand and withstand the Babylonian crisis.

Jeremiah comes to that conference wearing a wooden animal yoke, saying, you are going to be placed under the yoke of Babylon there is nothing you can do about it. Don't listen to your prophets that are encouraging your rebellion. This coalition that you are forming may seem like a viable political option but it’s not going to work. It is hopeless to resist. If you surrender, you'll be spared; if not, you'll be destroyed.
Jeremiah’s Fifth Message: Hope Lies with Exiles Not Those in Jerusalem

There is a fifth idea and a fifth message that Jeremiah is going to convey about the Babylonian crisis. He tells the people that the hope for Israel’s future lies with the exiles in Babylon, not with the Jews who remain in the land. Again, let’s go back to the time between deportation number two in 597 and the third deportation, the final exile, in 586. I am sure it was very easy for the people that were still living in the land to think this way: we were not taken away into a foreign country; we were not deported into exile; we are still here in the promise land. Somehow we’ve survived all of this. Therefore, we must be God’s favorite remnant. God’s blessed us; God’s left us in the land. The people that have been taken away into exile they experienced God’s judgment against them. God has favored us.

Well, in Jeremiah chapter 24, Jeremiah comes to the people and he’s going take those ideas and again, basically turn them upside down. Jeremiah says, “I saw a vision of a bowl of figs, and there was a bowl of good figs, fruitful, and there is future and there is hope. There is a bowl of bad figs that are so contaminated and rotten that they can’t be eaten. What Jeremiah says is that the good figs are the exiles that were taken away to Babylon. The hope for Israel’s future lies with them. The bad figs that are too rotten to even be eaten are the people that remain in the land. They’re going to be the target of more judgment and God ultimately brings that about with the fall of Jerusalem in 586.

Now the point of that was not, those people that were taken away into exile were pretty good people, they lived righteous lives; that’s not the point at all. All of the nation had sinned and fallen away from God, but what the vision conveyed was the fact that whatever hope there is for restoration in the future, whatever life is left in the land of Judah, it’s not with the people that are in Jerusalem. It’s not in the people that are left in the land. God is ultimately going to restore his people by restoring the exiles and bringing them back to their homeland. Jeremiah 24 goes
on to say that will happen when they turn to the Lord and when they seek him with a whole heart. But they are the future, not the people who are still there.

**Jeremiah’s Sixth Message: Babylon is Being Used by God to Punish Israel**

Jeremiah’s last perspective on this is that Jeremiah says that after God has used Babylon to punish Israel, God would punish Babylon for the sins that they had committed as well. One of the really important chapters in the book of Jeremiah; it’s really a hinge chapter; it ends the first part of the book and leads into the second part of the book, is God’s message about Babylon in Jeremiah chapter 25. In Jeremiah chapter 25:12-14 the Lord says this, beginning in verse 11, “The whole land shall become a ruin and a waste and these nations shall serve the nation of Babylon 70 years and then after the 70 years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and the nation, the land of the Chaldeans for their inequity,” says the Lord, ‘making their land an everlasting waste I will bring upon that land all of the words that I have uttered against it everything written in this book which Jeremiah prophesized against all the nations.’

**Babylon Will Be Judged As Well**

So the Lord is going to use Babylon to judge Israel, but ultimately God is going to judge Babylon as well. Nebuchadnezzar temporarily is God’s servant, but in the future God is going to judge the king of Babylon. God tells the exiles, “Pray for the peace of Babylon, temporarily I am working through that nation, that city,” but ultimately God’s judgment is going to fall on them as well.”

Jeremiah performs a sign act in the second half of chapter 25. He holds up a cup of wine, and this cup of wine represents the judgment of God all the nations of the earth are going to stagger under its intoxicating power. The Lord says first of all Jerusalem, Judah, the cities, the nations, they’re all going to drink this; but then it says at the end of verse 26 “and after them the king of Babylon shall drink as well.”
When we go to the last chapters of the book of Jeremiah, chapter 50 and chapter 51 the message there is a judgment speech against Babylon where God is going to judge them in the same way that he has judged Judah. One of the interesting things about that section of the book of Jeremiah is that many of the same prophetic oracles that are spoken against Jerusalem are taken and reapplied and directed against Babylon. There was an enemy from the north that was going to come against Judah; there is an enemy from the north that is going to come against Babylon.

So it is worth thinking about these messages from Jeremiah as we are studying this book. This is the playing field. This is the historical background. There is an incredible crisis going on. The nation of Judah is in its final days, and Jeremiah is warning them of the judgment that’s coming. But it’s also Jeremiah’s message, it’s his perspective that God has given to him that is also going to give them hope. There is no hope of withstanding Babylon but out of this, the exiles will become good things. After 70 years God is going to bring them back to the land. That message of hope is ultimately going to sustain them and help them, and that’s how God will bring about the renewal and the restoration of his people.

Transcribed by Kayla Winchester, Zach Medeiros, Chris Hardy, Dawson Tefft, Will Kinnard, Jeffrey McKay, and edited by Sarah Ferguson

Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Session 4
© 2013, Dr. Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt

Israel’s Final Kings: Jeremiah’s Domestic Setting

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his forth presentation on the book of Jeremiah. This forth session will focus on Israel’s final kings, and their relationship to the book of Jeremiah.

Review of the Three Waves of the Exile

We’re continuing in this session to look at the historical setting and background of Jeremiah’s ministry. One of the things that I think enhances my respect and admiration of Jeremiah is the way that he was faithful to God in a desperately horrible situation. Dealing with a crisis that was bringing his own nation to its end dealing personally with imprisonment, persecution, all kinds of opposition, and in our last session we looked at the international history and the international background of Jeremiah’s ministry. The Assyrians had passed off the scene the Neo-Babylonian empire was coming into place. God was going to use the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment.

We saw that the exile took place in three basic stages. In 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar took Daniel and the first wave of exiles away after he had taken control of Syro-Palestine. In 597, Nebuchadnezzar captured the city of Jerusalem a second time, in response to Jehoiakim’s rebellion, and there was a second wave of exiles. The prophet Ezekiel was included in that. The third wave of exiles is when Jerusalem was destroyed in 587-586 BC. The temple was burned down. It was one of the major theological crises that Israel experienced in all the Old Testament.

Domestic Crises

What I would like to look at in this particular lesson is more of the domestic history and what was going on among the leadership of Jerusalem and Judah internally as they were responding to this crisis. We talked a little bit last time about some of the kings, but we are going to look at that more specifically
and in the book of Jeremiah. We’re going to focus on Jeremiah 21 and 22 that are important to this background particularly. Let’s go back, and again as we are setting Jeremiah in his context.

**Davidic Covenant**

Let’s remember the covenant that God had with David as we look at the interaction that Jeremiah had with the kings of Judah who were the last representatives of the line of David before God completely took them off the throne. We go back to our key passage in 2 Samuel 7 where God made a covenant with David and with his sons that would come after him. There was an unconditional element to that covenant. The unconditional promise is that God would raise up a son for David that was Solomon, and beyond that time that the Lord would establish the throne of David, his dominion and his throne forever and for all time. In the Psalms, we have the Royal Psalms that pray for and anticipate the time that the Davidic king would rule over all the nations. We know that those promises were ultimately fulfilled through Jesus.

But it is also important to remember that there was a conditional element to the Davidic covenant as well. “If your son obeys me I will bless him, if he disobeys me I will punish him with the stripes of men.” And so there was the possibility of either blessing or judgment for each individual Davidic king based on his response to God. Throughout the history of Israel and Judah, God had maintained his covenant commitment and his promise to the house of David even at times when it looked like they deserved to be removed from the throne.

We can begin by looking at the life of David himself. God made this incredible promise to him but David later sins with Bathsheba and brings all kinds of heartache, grief, suffering and even death to his own children. We might ask the question: does that mean the end of God’s covenant promise to David? God still raises up a son for David and the son that he raised up even from the wife Bathsheba that came out of this adulterous relationship, a later son, Solomon, would be the one who was king of Israel to follow him.
Solomon was blessed by God with incredible wisdom, but by the end of his life because of his many marriages he turned away from the Lord. The Lord commanded the king that there were three things that he was not supposed to do: he was not to accumulate wives, he was not to accumulate horses, and he was not to accumulate gold and treasure. Solomon violated all of those things, and this could have been a time that God could have removed the Davidic throne, took away the Davidic promises, but God kept his promise and he kept his covenant commitment to David. God ultimately punished the house of David by taking away a large portion of the kingdom and the kingdom divided into the ten northern tribes that followed another king and the two tribes in the south that remained loyal to David and his sons. But God kept covenant commitment. In 1 Kings 15, we read about the grandson of Solomon by the name of Abijam. He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord, but verse 4 of that chapter says that in spite of that God left a lamp for David. God kept his covenant promises.

Later on we move to the time of a very godly king by the name of Jehoshaphat. But Jehoshaphat makes one terrible decision. He enters into a marriage alliance with the house of Ahab. You remember that Ahab and Jezebel had led Israel into apostasy. Jehoshaphat married his son off to a daughter from that family. Ultimately, Athaliah, the daughter that is part of that arrangement of that alliance, actually attempts to become the ruler of Judah and to wipe out the royal line. As I’m teaching this story to my students I asked them to imagine that the Davidic covenant is hanging by the thread of the life of one little baby. As Athaliah is wiping out and killing and murdering her grandchildren to preserve her rule and dominion a nurse gathers up one royal son, takes him away and keeps him in hiding and the answer to why that happened is God was keeping his promise to David. I imagine that story is almost a Satanic attack on the whole Messianic line. God is not going to allow that line to be wiped out.

Later on we come in the book of Kings to the story of Manasseh. Manasseh ironically reigns longer than any of the kings in the line of David. He reigns for 55
years. God allows him to be on the throne but he is also the worst king in the Davidic line. God even says to him through one of the prophets that he did more evil than the kings that came before him that reigned in the land of Israel before the Israelites came there. Manasseh filled Jerusalem with bloodshed, with violence, and with injustice. He offered his son as a sacrifice to the gods. He was desperately wicked and in that passage in Kings the Lord says: because of this incredible wickedness of Manasseh, I am going to wipe Jerusalem like a dish.

Now this happened in the half century and before the time that Josiah came to the throne so in all of these examples David’s sin, Solomon’s apostasy, Abijam’s weakness, Jehoshaphat’s marriage alliance, Manasseh’s corruption, God still kept the Davidic line intact. But remember that conditional element, “if he is obedient I will bless him, if he is disobedient I will punish him with the stripes of men.” Maybe that was not even understood at the time when the original prophesy was given, that punishment could involve the removal of the kings of Judah from the throne, the removal of the Davidic line, that’s exactly what happens in the lifetime of Jeremiah. It’s not just the fall of Jerusalem, it’s not just the collapse of the nation of Judah, but it’s also the removal of the Davidic king and the Davidic line. We have this question and this ordeal: what’s going to happen to God’s covenant promises to David? There is going to be an emphasis in the book of Jeremiah on this conditional aspect of the covenant that the Lord has made with the house of David. There is going to be an emphasis on the fact that the only way that the Davidic line will continue, the only way it will survive, the only way that it can continue to enjoy the blessings of God is by being fruitful, faithful and obedient to God’s commands. We see a couple key passages in the book of Jeremiah that bring this out.

I want to read from Jeremiah chapter 21 verses 11-14. Remember as we are reading this passage the context of the Davidic covenant both the conditional and unconditional elements. “And to the house of the king of Judah you are to say this: ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O house of David! Thus says the Lord: Execute
justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil deeds. Behold, I am against you, O inhabitant of that of the valley, O rock of the plain,’ declares the Lord; you who say, ‘who shall come down against us, or who shall enter into our habitations?’ I will punish you according to the fruits of your deeds.’” So Lord warned the people of Judah I’m going to bless you or punish you on the basis of your deeds but the Lord gives that same word to the house of David. Execute justice in the morning. If you do what is just and right I’ll bless you, I'll allow your line to continue. In Psalm 72, in a prayer for Solomon, the Psalm says in the reign of the king of David when he executed justice, when he took care of the poor and the needy, that it would bring prosperity on the land. It would be like the rain and dew that refreshed the land. Unfortunately the kings in Jeremiah’s day are going to be exactly the opposite of that ideal picture.

There’s another emphasis on the conditional nature of the promises that God made to David that if these kings that are going to rule and reign during Jeremiah’s time, if they’re going to be blessed by God then they have to be obedient to God’s covenant commands. In verse 1, chapter 22 the Lord tells Jeremiah, “Go down to the house of the king of Judah and speak there this word and say to him, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah, who sits on the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates.” The message applies to the king as much as it does to the people. “Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.” And here’s the conditional element, verse 4: “For if you will indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who shall sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their servants and their people.” Verse 5: “But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that this
house shall become a desolation.” So there’s a real choice to be made by the kings that are reigning on the throne. If they obey, they will be blessed; if the disobey, then there’s the chance that God will bring curses on the house of David.

The problem is that by this time in Judah’s history they have been preserved from so many scrapes. God has done so much to make sure that the Davidic line continues that they took God’s promises to the house of David as an absolute guarantee. God will take care of us no matter what. Yes, these are important statements about obedience but God will preserve us and God will protect us no matter what.

There’s another passage again that’s going to emphasize the same thing in Jeremiah chapter 17, I’m just going to read a couple of verses there first verse 24 says this to the people: “But if you listen to me declares the Lord and bring no burden in by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day but keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of the city kings and princes who sit in the throne of David riding on chariots and horses. Their officials, their men etc.” Again, the power and the rule in the dominion of the Davidic line is not guaranteed by the covenant promises. There is a contingent element here that if they disobey God they could be severely punished. The message of Jeremiah is to the point that God would remove them from the throne and that’s exactly what we have. That’s exactly what happens in the lifetime of the ministry of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah ministers during the time of five kings who reign on the throne of Judah. What I think we can imagine here is that the house of David and all of its past history has finally reached a point of wickedness where God says that he is no longer going to allow them to remain on the throne. They can no longer have the privilege of ruling over God’s people; they can no longer have the position of being the vice-regents who execute God’s rule on earth. So let’s take a look at these five kings.
Jeremiah’s Five Kings: King Josiah

We begin very positively and the first king that Jeremiah is going to minister during the reign of Josiah. Josiah reigns in Judah from 640 BC to 609 BC. Jeremiah is called to be a prophet during the 13th year of Josiah’s reign 626 BC. So, the thing that is important to understand about Josiah is that Josiah is the last godly king in the nation of Judah. He comes to the throne when he is 8 years old--imagine that. But he’s directed by very godly advisors, priests, people that helped him and point him in the right direction.

Then, just a few years after Jeremiah begins his ministry, there is a scroll of the Book of the Law, the book of Deuteronomy or other parts of the Law of Moses that are found when they are making repairs in the temple. They read this scroll, and realize it’s important. They take the message to the king, the king tears his garment because he realizes how far Judah has wandered away from the laws of God and God’s standards of justice and righteousness. Because of that, and the things that have happened even leading up to that, Josiah determines that he is going to lead the nation in a godly direction. So we can imagine as Jeremiah begins his ministry there are very few direct references to Josiah in the book of Jeremiah. We can imagine that these two men were in harmony with each other and Jeremiah is calling people come back to the Lord, he’s extending that even to the tribes that are in the north with the possibility that Josiah is going to bring Israel and Judah back together. There’s real hope because Josiah leads a godly revival. There’s a renewal, the idols are removed, the sanctuary at the valley of Hinnom that was dedicated to false gods is desecrated and burned and that’s turned into a dumping ground. Josiah had a deep commitment in his life to obey God.

In Jeremiah chapter 22, which is a message that’s directed to these final kings of Judah who reigned during Jeremiah’s time of ministry, he tells the kings that come after Josiah, “Learn to practice and execute justice like your father did.” So Jeremiah and Josiah, we can imagine them working in harmony, things seem to
be moving in a positive direction as the prophet is calling the people back to God. There’s another prophet by the name of Zephaniah who’s also preaching during this time. It appears that he may have had some type of influence on Josiah also causing these reforms to come about and it looks as if things are going to move in a very positive direction.

However, in the year 609 BC Josiah makes a fateful decision as much as his rule has been positive. Imagine this man is 39 years old, yet he’s still in the vitality of life, he makes a bad decision. He decides that he is going to become entangled in the international affairs that involve Egypt and Assyria fighting against Babylon. Josiah believes that if the Assyrian empire can finally collapse then his independence movement is going to be supported by that. So he makes a decision against God’s counsel and against God’s advice that he is going to fight against the Egyptians as they go to help the Assyrians in their battle with the Babylonians. As a result of that, Josiah was fatally wounded at Megiddo and in the prime of life. Judah lost its last godly king. As we look at this story and as we see this from this point forward every one of the rulers that come after Josiah, his sons and his brother, it is actually going to be said about them that they did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the reforms that came about, the revival, in the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry it looks like there is going to be a positive turning to God. The response to Zephaniah and his ministry, the book of the law, all of those accomplishments, all of that is going to be turned around when Josiah is killed in battle.

It tells us in 2 Chronicles, that Jeremiah, at the time of Josiah’s death in Megiddo, composed laments for the king and there was a time of real mourning. For people who are old enough to remember the Kennedy assassination and a death of a young president, I’m sure that’s what it was like in Judah. On top of that, there was this godly leader removed from the throne.

**King Jehoahaz/Shallum**

So after the death of Josiah, the second king that is going to come to the
throne during the time of Jeremiah’s ministry, and is just going to be there for a short while, is King Jehoahaz. He is also referred to by the name of Shallum. Shallum is the king that is placed on the throne immediately after the death of his father. You remember that the Egyptians were the ones that killed Josiah in battle. When the Egyptians go back to Egypt, after they have engaged in battle with the Assyrians and the Babylonians and they are going to come back through the land of Judah. They are going to remove Jehoahaz from the throne, possibly because they feel that he is going to continue the policies of his father being supportive of Babylon. They are going to put another brother on the throne in his place. What happens to Jehoahaz is he is taken away as a captive to Egypt. So, after being on the throne for three months, the Egyptians take him off the throne and they put his brother Jehoiakim there in his place.

The prophet Jeremiah has this to say about Jehoahaz, Shallum. Remember in Kings it tells us that “he did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord,” and we don’t know exactly what the entails, but that pattern, that character was established in his life before he came to the throne. There was nothing that happened in that short period that overturned that. Here is what Jeremiah says about Shallum or Jehoahaz: “Thus says the Lord concerning Shallum the son of Josiah the king of Judah, who reigned there instead of Josiah his father and who went away from this place, he shall return no more. But in the place where they have carried him captive there shall he die and he will never see this land again.” So, Jeremiah offers no hope that Jehoahaz is ever going to come back from the land of Egypt and he died there as a captive. We really don’t know any more about him, that’s the end of his story and after three months this man who did evil in the eyes of the Lord is removed and taken away.

King Jehoiakim

We think maybe there is the possibility that there is another brother that will come to the throne, there is Jehoiakim, that maybe there’s the possibility that Jehoiakim is a godly king and Jehoiakim comes on the throne in 609 BC and he
reigns until sometime in 597 BC. He’s no longer on the throne when the Babylonians capture the city. So for twelve years Jehoiakim is going to reign over Judah during the time of Jeremiah’s ministry. The unfortunate thing is that Kings is going to say the same thing about Jehoiakim that is says about Jehoahaz, “he did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.” Beyond that Jehoiakim is going to make some very bad political decisions. Remember he is placed on the throne by the Egyptians. That’s 609 BC. In 605 BC the Babylonians are going to defeat the Egyptians at Carchemish and become the dominate power in the ancient Near East. Jehoiakim is going to go back and forth between allegiance to Egypt. They were the ones that put him on the throne in the first place, and allegiance to Babylon. What is going to happen is that whenever it is really forced upon him, he’s going to give his loyalty to Babylon, but he is always secretly in his heart holding forth the possibility that maybe the Egyptians can help us and get us out of the situation with the Babylonians. So, he is going to go back and forth between loyalty to Babylon and loyalty to Egypt.

In 602 BC this becomes such a problem that 2 Chronicles 36:6 says that when the king of Babylon comes to Jerusalem he puts Jehoiakim in shackles and he arrests him. He has been an unfaithful vassal, but before he takes him back to Babylon Jehoiakim, for some reason, convinces him that he will remain loyal. He has a come-to-Jesus moment here where he understands that he has to be loyal to the Babylonians. So temporarily he gives his loyalty to the Babylonians, and they allow him to remain on the throne.

Then in 598/599 BC, a short period after this, Jehoiakim again is looking for a way to get out from under the Babylonians. That’s going to lead to the second capture of city of Jerusalem in 597. We read about the 2 Kings 24:17 and in our last lesson we also saw that that capture of Jerusalem and the removal of the king of Judah from the throne is recorded in the Babylonian Chronicle as well. So Jehoiakim did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. Jehoiakim made some foolish and poor political decisions, but there are some other thing that we learn in the
book of Jeremiah that I think reflect to us the depth of how wicked this man was.

Jeremiah’s leading antagonist was Jehoiakim the king. The hostility between these two men is so great that there is never a place in the single book where they have a meeting with each other. Now throughout the Old Testament we have confrontations between kings and prophets. We have Elijah and Ahab. We have Isaiah and Ahaz. In the book of Jeremiah we have him consulting with Zedekiah later on, but there is never a single time we are face to face Jehoiakim and Jeremiah meet with each other. I think the reason is that it just wasn’t going to happen because of the hostility between these two men.

Now this is what Jeremiah has to say about Jehoiakim in chapter 22:13-17. I think this passage gives us some insight into the character of this man and what he was like as the leader of Judah. Remember the first wave of exiles has already been taken away. The threat and the possibility of more exiles and a military crisis is very real. Here is what Jeremiah says about Jehoiakim in chapter 22:13: “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages, who says, ‘I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,’ who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? Declares the Lord. But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.” So Josiah had fulfilled the ideal of what a king was supposed to look like, Psalm 72, he cares for the poor he cares for the oppressed, he cares for the needy that becomes the rain and the dew that blesses the nation.

With Jehoiakim, on the other hand, there’s this crisis when people are struggling for food, for survival, for resources. Jehoiakim is doing a remodeling project on the temple. He is making the temple bigger and better and he is
paneling the walls he’s adding to his luxury and comfort. Jeremiah says: “Is this the kind of response that God wants from Judah’s leader?” And the answer is obviously, no. He has violated the principle. So we get further insight, he’s not just a man who did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he’s a man who is consumed by his own selfish interest. Babylon was going to come and oppress the people and put them in bondage and slavery. Jehoiakim, in a sense, was acting like the pharaoh. During time of the exodus he was putting them in bondage and oppression to rebuild his own palace. That’s a little bit about the wickedness, the depravity of Jehoiakim.

**King Jehoiakim and God’s Word**

It doesn’t stop there because Jehoiakim is also a man who absolutely hated the word of God. There is a hostility toward the prophets of God in Jehoiakim’s life that I think is as great as any other king that we see in the Old Testament. I think we’ve all had the reaction or the response sometimes when we try to share Christ with someone who becomes really angry and antagonistic toward that. That generally means we’ve touched a chord in their life. We’ve touched a sensitive area and I believe that’s what happened in Jehoiakim’s life. The word of God confronted him and as a result of that, he often became very antagonistic and hostile when he heard it.

We have the first example of this in Jeremiah chapter 26, and this particular incident appears to happen early in the reign of Jehoiakim shortly after the time that he became king in 609. It tells us in Jeremiah 26:20, that there was another prophet in Jerusalem and in Judah. We don’t know much about him. His name is Uriah. And Uriah, just like Jeremiah, was warning of the judgment that God was planning to bring. It says this, “He prophesied against the city and against the land,” and it says, “in words like those of Jeremiah.” So Uriah is a carbon copy of Jeremiah and Jehoiakim hears this message, becomes violently angry to the point that he’s going to put this prophet to death. Uriah, in fear for his life, flees to Egypt to do anything that he can to try to escape from this wicked king.
Remember, he can’t even be in the same room as Jeremiah. Ultimately, Jehoiakim uses his political connections with Egypt and it says in verse 22, “Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men,” and these men are his officers who go down to Egypt. In verse 23, “They took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim who struck him down with a sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people.” So, what’s Jehoiakim’s reaction to the word of God? There is immediate anger, violent opposition, and persecution of the Lord’s messenger.

Remember, in the New Testament where Jesus tells the people of Jerusalem as they are angry about his message, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you killed the prophets and from the blood of Able [in the book of Genesis] to the blood of Zechariah [in the book of Chronicles], you’re guilty of the blood of the prophets.” Jehoiakim was a man who actually did that. We see all kinds of angry confrontations. Jezebel and Elijah, Ahab and Elijah, Ahaz and Isaiah, but there are very few times where we actually see a king putting a prophet to death. We have that in Jehoiakim’s life.

Now, four years later, we’re going to see another incident. In 605 BC, after Jeremiah has been preaching for more than twenty years, God commands him to write a scroll of his prophecies. Because this is a pretty dangerous situation, Jeremiah stays in hiding. Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch, takes that scroll. He transcribes the words of judgment. He goes to the temple. He reads it. There are officials there who hear the message and realize, “This is serious. We need to take it to the king.” So they take the scroll to the king. They gain a hearing. They begin to read this and it says that the king is sitting in his comfortable upper apartment, the fireplace is going. We go back to chapter 22 remembering him remodeling his palace and he’s there. It says, as they read him the words of judgment, there’s no fear, there’s no response to God, there’s no humility, there’s no repentance. It says, instead, as they read the words of the scroll to him, he took a knife and cut it out column by column and he threw it into the fire. So that’s Jehoiakim and he’s the third king from 609 to 597.
Now, we’re going to look at that story of Jeremiah and the scroll and Jehoiakim in chapter 36 a little bit later, but I want to remind you again of Jehoiakim’s father, Josiah. In 2 Kings 22, the prophets and officials bring a scroll to the king that the king needs to hear. It’s newly discovered. It’s the law of God. It’s been forgotten for a while, but Josiah recognizes what it is and it says, “He humbled himself. He tore his garments. He feared the Lord. He repented. He responded.”

That passage provides a direct contrast to what we have in chapter 36. Jehoiakim does not fear the Lord. Instead of tearing his garments, he cuts up the scroll. Instead of burning these idols and all the things, it says that he burns the word of God. Jehoiakim believed that by his royal authority and power that he could set aside the word of God. He was going to find out otherwise. So Jehoiakim reigns from 609 to 597 BC. He is Jeremiah’s leading antagonist. I really believe at the time that he destroyed the scroll that if he could have gotten his hands on Jeremiah, or if he could have gotten his hands on Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch, he would have done the same thing to them that he did to Uriah.

**King Jehoiachin**

There is a fourth king who succeeds Jehoiakim, his son, Jehoiachin, who is actually on the throne in 597 BC at the time when the Babylonians captured the city. Jehoiachin is eighteen years old. His father has died just a few months previous to this. Some people suggest that (we don’t know the circumstances of Jehoiakim’s death) that perhaps some of the people in Judah assassinated him or put him to death as a way of trying to appease to the Babylonians. Maybe if we get rid of this rebellious king, the Babylonians will leave us alone. But Jehoiachin comes to the throne in 597. He’s eighteen years old. Again, it tells us that, “He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.” And that trait and that character was just like what Jehoiakim had earlier. That trait identifies the kind of person he is.

So, he’s on the throne when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 597 take the city. I can’t imagine the pressure and the fear and the things that
Jehoiachin was going through. He’s also known by the name of Coniah. When the Babylonians enter the city, when they take the city, Jehoiachin is taken away as a captive. He becomes a prisoner of the Babylonians and he’s led away with this second wave of exiles that included Ezekiel and a large group of the people of Judah. He is also, just like what Jehahaz is going to spend the rest of his life in captivity.

Now there is a passage about Jehoiachin in this section that’s addressed to the kings of Judah in Jeremiah 22 and it’s a message of judgment. It’s a message of judgment again based on the fact that Coniah, or Jehoiachin, did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. Here’s the passage. Verse 24, “As I live, declares the Lord, though Coniah (or Jehoiachin), the son of Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, were the signet ring on my right hand, yet I would tear you off and give you into the hand of those who seek your life, into the hand of those whom you are afraid of, even into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and into the hand of the Chaldeans. I will hurl you and the mother who bore you into another country, where you are not born, and there you will die. But to the land to which they long to return, there they shall not return. Is this man a Coniah a despised a broken pot, a vessel no one cares for? Why are he and his children hurled and cast into a land that they do not know? O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord.” Then in verse thirty in chapter 22, the final word of judgment against Jehoiachin, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah.” All right, there are couple images that are used here of Jehoiachin. First of all, he’s compared to a broken pot, a worthless piece of pottery. Pottery was very common and useful for all sorts of things. When you were done with it, you just simply tossed it aside. Jehoiachin is going to be like an everyday pot that’s tossed aside. He’s going to be childless, in the sense that none of his sons will succeed him; none of his sons will sit on the throne. Remember, God had said to David, “I’ll give you a son; I’ll preserve your line forever.” That
arrangement appears to be in jeopardy, because Jehoiachin is not going to have a son to succeed him or to sit on the throne in his place.

The other image that’s used in this passage is that Jehoiachin is compared to the signet ring of God. I want to take just a minute to explain what we mean by “signet ring.” The signet was the personal seal of the king. The seal was impressed in clay as a way of providing the signature or authority. It represented the person of the king himself. The Lord is saying about the House of David, “In the relationship that I’ve had with David, the Davidic kings, they have been my signet rings. I have adopted them and I have chosen them. They are my human vice-regents. They execute justice for me. They rule over the people of God.” They are God’s royal, anointed vice-regents. They represent God. But the Lord is announcing with Jehoiachin, “I am going to take that signet ring, I’m removing it from my hand, and I’m casting it aside.” So the authority, the power, the blessing, all the things that have been associated with the House of David up to this time, God is taking those things away. Jehoiachin is taken away and he’s left as a captive in Babylon for the rest of his life.

Now, when we come to Jeremiah chapter 52:31-34, the last event, the last episode that’s described in the book of Jeremiah—this is also the conclusion to 2 Kings 25, it’s the last event we read about there too. It tells us that in 560 BC remember Jehoiachin went down when he was 18 years old. So he’s been there for 37 years. He is released from prison in Babylon, and he’s allowed to eat at the king’s table. During the time of Jehoiachin and his sons most of the hopes that the people of Judah had, for any kind of restoration, were associated with Jehoiachin. So he’s an important person even though he’s a prisoner; even though he’s no longer a king, even though he was 18 years old and only there for 3 months, he represents the hopes and the future of the Davidic line. Well, in Jeremiah 52 and in 2 Kings 25, the last event in the book, this king is released from prison and he’s allowed to eat at the king’s table.
A Babylonian text—again, another extra biblical source, confirming what we read in the book of Jeremiah—is a ration text from the same period. It mentions that rations are given to Jehoiachin and to his sons. So, it seems to go along with the story that he was treated favorably, treated well, allowed to eat at the king’s table, and released from prison. What’s significant about that? That’s probably not a Bible story that we’ve thought about much, the release of Jehoiachin from prison and we may not even really know who Jehoiachin was. What this represents, both in Kings and Jeremiah, is that it’s a very minimal thing, and it’s a very small thing, but even the kindness that the king of Babylon showed to this member of the line of David at the end of his life is a reminder. It’s a reminder, it’s a glamour of hope that God is not finished with the line of David. We could imagine that the biblical writer could have simply said, “Jehoiachin was taken away, he’s a prisoner, he died there, end of the story.”

There’s not a lot of promising details about the restoration in 2 Kings. The story ends in a very depressing way, but the last event that’s mentioned is the release of Jehoiachin from prison. We don’t get the story of the return of the people from exile, it almost looks like a TV show that ends before the final act is there, but Kings was actually written before the return. This one small act is a reminder that God is not finished with the House of David.

**King Zedekiah**

So Jehoiachin is taken away in 597, that was the second captivity, and then finally for the last 11 years of Israel and Judah’s history, they are going to be ruled over by the last member of the Davidic line, and his name is Zedekiah.

We talked about Zedekiah in the last video, but I want to review this by just talking about this for few minutes. He’s installed on the throne by the Babylonians. The Babylonians do not destroy Jerusalem at this time in 597. They are convinced that Jerusalem can still be a viable province under their rule. So, they install Zedekiah on the throne, another son of Josiah. But again, the assessment in Kings is: “He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.” In Kings,
what a king accomplishes politically or militarily or economically doesn’t matter, ultimately, it’s God’s assessment, and that’s true for all of us.

But Zedekiah is a weak ruler. He goes back and forth between submitting to Babylon and resisting Babylon. Jeremiah is telling him, “There is no way that you can survive; there’s no way that the war effort can be successful. You need to submit to Babylon.” When the Babylonians finally invade in 588. There’s this 18 months where Jeremiah’s message is: “Surrender! It’s the only way that you can avoid destruction.” As a result of that, Zedekiah’s officers, who are encouraging the resistance, are going to continually oppose Jeremiah, they’re going to have him put in prison, and they’re going to throw him in a cistern. They do not want him circulating his message. Again, going back to that passage in chapter 38, “Jeremiah is weakening the hands of our soldiers. He’s telling us that we can’t succeed, so we need to keep him out of sight, we need to keep him out of earshot of people.” Zedekiah goes along with that and keeps Jeremiah in prison. We see this sort of frustrating thing, where there are numerous times, Jeremiah 21, Jeremiah 34, Jeremiah 37, Jeremiah 38, where Zedekiah keeps coming to Jeremiah saying, “Tell me what I should do.” The Lord tells him, but he doesn’t do it. Zedekiah says, “Pray for us that the Lord might do a marvelous work.” I think he’s wanting God to step in, intervene and save him; but at the same time, he doesn’t have the courage to obey and to follow God.

It’s interesting to place Jehoiachin beside Zedekiah. They’re placed side by side in the book of Jeremiah. One disobeyed out of hostility and anger. One disobeyed out of weakness and fear. But both of them, ultimately, did not listen to the word of the Lord. As a result of that, the city of Jerusalem is captured. Zedekiah tries to flee, but he’s captured by the Babylonians, his sons are executed, he is blinded, he’s taken away, and he dies as a prisoner in Babylon because he disobeyed the word of the Lord and because he did not pay attention to what Jeremiah said.
For all intents and purposes, we have come to the end of this history, this survey of the last kings. It looks as if the Davidic line has come to an end, which makes it all the more amazing that Jeremiah is going to say, “In the future, there will be a righteous branch that comes from the line of David,” in Jeremiah 23, and 33. Jeremiah chapter 30: when the Lord delivers the people from their yoke of bondage to Babylon, they will serve David their king, because the Lord is going to restore the Davidic line. We will look later on at a prophet named Haggai, who takes Jeremiah’s prophecy about the signet ring and says to the grandson of Jehoiachin, “You have now become the Lord’s signet ring!” The Lord takes that Davidic leader, puts the ring back on his finger, and restores them to power and authority. Ultimately, Zerubbabel never became a king, but he pointed forward to the one who would become a king and how the House of David would once again become God’s signet ring. We see the message of judgment against the House of David in Jeremiah’s message; yet we also see the promises of hope. That’s essential and important for us to understand the context and historical background of Jeremiah’s message.
Composition of Jeremiah

Introduction

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number five on the composition of Jeremiah.

I really want to applaud you for your efforts in studying the book of Jeremiah. I know it's different from so many other parts of the Bible. It's actually the longest book in the Old Testament and there are times maybe as you are initially approaching the book where you say, "How do I make sense of this, this long confusing book?" What I would like to look at in the next couple of sessions is just thinking about how we approach the book of Jeremiah as a book. In this particular session, I will talk about the composition of the book of Jeremiah and how the book of Jeremiah was put together.

I think we understand that even though Jeremiah is the word of God and we believe 2 Timothy 3:16 "All scripture is God-breathed." It's given to us by God--2 Peter 1:21 "Holy men spoke as they were moved along [like the sails in the wind] by the Holy Spirit;" but it's not a book that fell out of heaven. It's also not a book where every time Jeremiah preached someone was there to transcribe what he said and that was immediately added to the book. It was not a book where God simply took Jeremiah up on the mountain and revealed to him what he should write down, there was a long involved process in putting together this long book.

Jeremiah's ministry extended from the time that he was called in the 13th year of Josiah, 626 BC, until sometime around 580 BC. So we're talking about a ministry that lasted approximately 50 years. So, putting together and representing a book that portrays that ministry obviously there was a long and involved process in this.
There are a couple of quotes from some scholars as they've approached the book of Jeremiah. First of all, Andrew Shead makes this comment and maybe you can resonate with this as you are trying to read through Jeremiah and understand the book. "Jeremiah is long, full of repetitions, non-linear in its chronology, and constantly cycling from one genre to another." R.P Carroll in his commentary on the book of Jeremiah who takes an overly skeptical approach to understanding the message of this book, does make a couple of statements that we need to think about he says, "To the modern reader the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are virtually incomprehensible as books." And then he says this, "The person who was not confused by the book of Jeremiah has not understood it." I remember at times writing my dissertation on the book of Jeremiah and thinking that is exactly right. But, again, I think that is an overly skeptical approach.

As we are thinking about Jeremiah as a book I want to give us two images that maybe we can think of. Imagine someone trying to represent in one book the ministry of someone like Dr. Billy Graham and a long ministry of snippets of his sermons often without chronology or time or events going on in his life and trying to make sense of that. Putting together a picture of Dr. Graham's ministry is a very difficult thing to do. Another image that I think about is that we might think of the book of Jeremiah as an old farmhouse; and as you look at that house you realize that there was an early house there and there have been several additions, wings, and extensions added on as different family members came in and as the house perhaps changed ownership. Sometimes we have to go and look at the floor plan of that house to understand why and how it was put together.

So what I would like us to look at today in this session is to think about the composition. How was the book of Jeremiah put together? Then in the session that follows I’ll do an overview of the book of Jeremiah and giving an understanding that there is an order; there is a chronology; there is a flow and a sense to this book that helps us to understand it.
Mowinckel’s Three Categories and Jeremiah’s Composition

Poetic oracles, Narrative, Prose Sermons

One of the issues that comes up as we are looking at the composition of the book of Jeremiah is that we recognize that it consists of different genres and types of material. In fact, one of the earlier critical studies in the book of Jeremiah, Bernard Duhm made a distinction between the poetry in the book of Jeremiah and the prose that's in the book of Jeremiah. Sigmund Mowinckel came along and added to that study, noting that there are three different specific genres in the book of Jeremiah and he referred to these as the A, the B, and the C materials. The A material that Mowinckel identified were the poetic oracles of Jeremiah, and these are the oracles in poetic form. They are very common especially in chapters 1 to 25. Critical scholars have tended to look at this as the primary way that the prophets communicated their message. In fact, as we look at the prophetic books in general, they are filled with poetic oracles where with vivid imagery, parallelism and just powerful quick images, the prophets have conveyed their message.

The second type of material that Mowinckel identified was the B material or the narrative accounts or the stories from the prophet's life and ministry. One of the things that makes the book of Jeremiah unique is that there are a number of these stories from the life of Jeremiah. Really the only prophetic book that is like the book of Jeremiah in this regard is the book of Jonah but Jonah is a very brief book. Comparing it to the book of Isaiah, Isaiah has 66 chapters but there are really only two sections chapters 6 to 8 chapters 37 to 39 that have narratives and stories from the life of Isaiah. So Jeremiah is unique in this regard, there is a much more extensive use of narrative.

Then finally the C materials are what Mowinckel referred to as the prose sermons. These are sermons, rather than being in the forms of poetic oracles. These are sermons that are long flowing prose accounts.

Imagine a transcript of your pastor's sermons and there are passages where
Jeremiah is preaching where in some sense it looks like the transcript of a sermon. One example of these, and I think very significant part of the book of Jeremiah is and I wanted to read a couple of verses here is the prose sermon that we have in chapter 11. The prose sermon in chapter 11 is focusing on the idea that God is punishing Israel and Judah for their violations of the covenant. So, obviously, it is a very important concept to the book of Jeremiah. Here is the way this passage begins. It says in verse 1, "The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, ‘Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: cursed be the man who does not hear the words of this covenant that I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace saying, ‘Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So you shall be my people, and I will be your God, that I may confirm the oath that I swore to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey as it is this day.’ Then I answered, ‘So be it Lord.’” Then the passage even goes on further. It gives us more of this account, more of this sermon, and so we don't simply have brief poetic oracles here we have an extended sermon.

Now what critical scholars have done with these three different types of material is that they have tended to view the poetry of the book as being the earliest sections and the more real and authentic Jeremiah. They have taken the narratives and the prose sermons and viewed those more as a later re-interpretation of the prophet. And they have tended to see these as being edited by the Deuteronomistic editors and to varying degrees, they see these later sources and these later materials reinterpreting the prophet Jeremiah and his message.

So there’s actually become a question in critical scholarship: How much of the historical Jeremiah can we really know? Is the portrait of Jeremiah in this book a realistic and honest one, or have these later sources basically given us a different person than what we would really see if we were there historically?

**Response to Sources Theory**
I want you to think about this, and couple of ideas and a couple of responses just in terms of that. I believe that the reasons for these different sources is just the obvious possibility that there were variant ways that Jeremiah communicated his message. Sometimes, maybe, as a street preacher, it was advantageous to communicate in powerful brief images and oracles. But I think it’s also very likely that there were times when Jeremiah went to the temple and preached his temple sermon and, that there were more extended sermons, and something more like what we would hear from our pastor on a Sunday morning. I think the second thing is that it’s not surprising to us that many of the words and the phrases in the sermons and in the narratives in Jeremiah are similar to the Book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history. The book of Kings, which is part of that history was written in 550 BC. Jeremiah concluded his ministry sometime around 580 BC. So I think it’s very likely that the editors who were involved in the composition of these historical books and their final editing in 550 and the 6th century and the time of the exile, may have also been involved in the final composition and editing of the book of Jeremiah. These books cross-pollinated each other and often times the direction of influence is very difficult to determine.

I think a third thing is to realize that as we compare the Deuteronomistic history books, as they’ve been labeled, and compare the book of Jeremiah, there are unique ideas in the book of Jeremiah that makes its message distinctive. Deuteronomy, for example, or the history of the Deuteronomistic history in Kings, is going to emphasize that God judges Jerusalem because of the wickedness of Manasseh and his 55 years, and God says “I’m going to wipe Jerusalem like a dish.”

Jeremiah is more going to focus on the latter part of the Davidic dynasty and the failure of the kings that came after Josiah that we looked at in our earlier lesson. Jeremiah, uh in contrast to Kings, is going to emphasize much more strongly the idea of restoration. The message of restoration in Kings is very
minimal, at the end of the book we have Jehoiachin being released from prison. But a clear statement, or purpose of what God is going to do in all the restoration is not fully there. So Jeremiah looks more like the book of Deuteronomy in that respect, than it does the Deuteronomistic history.

I think a fourth thing that we can understand from the use poetry, prose, and narrative is that there has been, in many ways, a reflective recasting of Jeremiah. But, but I believe that that work was done by Jeremiah and Baruch himself. Conservative commentators like John Thompson in the NICOT commentary of Jeremiah have emphasized that Jeremiah and Baruch themselves, as they reflected over the long years of Jeremiah’s ministry came to a deeper understanding of what Jeremiah’s message was about. They came to a deeper understanding of what God’s plan was and God’s design and God’s intention for the future.

In the beginning of Jeremiah’s message, Jeremiah’s preaching is calling the people to repentance. During the reforms of Josiah there’s the possibility that they could avoid judgment. But in the later recasting of that message, in the end of his life, that becomes a message for the exiles—for them to return, for them to come back to God. So I think the reflection that is going on about Jeremiah’s ministry doesn’t have to be Deuteronomistic editors that have revised and changed his message, it can be can be Jeremiah and Baruch themselves as they come to a deeper understanding of the purposes and designs of God.

Then, finally, with regard with this issue of the different types of material, whether we read the poetic oracles, the prose narratives or the prose sermons, the perspective of Jeremiah that emerges from these different materials is not that different. There is a basic theological unity to this book. There are certain key ideas that are going to come across no matter what part of the book we’re looking at, or what kind of materials we’re looking at.

There’s going to be the emphasis: Judah has broken the covenant; they have violated God’s law. They have worshipped idols. As a result of that they deserve
God’s punishment that’s not simply Deuteronomy, that’s the message of the entire Old Testament.

The second key idea is that the Lord is using Babylon as the instrument of judgment. Again, that’s not just prose or poetry, that’s the message of the book as a whole. Then as we’re looking at the entire book, both in the poetic and the prose sections there’s the promise that after there has been judgment, there’s going to be restoration.

So, I don’t believe that we need to take Jeremiah and divide it up into sources. There’s theological unity in this book. We don’t have to pit the prose against the poetry, because there’s a unified picture of Jeremiah that emerges out from all of these different materials.

One likelihood is that there are also literary reasons why the message of Jeremiah is communicated in these different genres and these different forms. What Louis Stulman has suggested is that the prose sermons are actually placed in the book as a way to guide us through the message and ministry of Jeremiah. So what ends up happening is, as we have the poetic oracles of Jeremiah, all of these different images begin to bombard us: Judah is an unfaithful wife. God is sending against the people of Judah a roaring lion; Judah has been unfaithful to God in all these different ways.

What the prose sermons do is that they take all of that poetic imagery and they summarize them, and in effect they provide a Cliff Notes summary for us of what the message of Jeremiah was all about.

So what Stulman suggests is that, in Jeremiah 1-25, we have five specific prose sermons. That, really in many ways, helped the people of Jeremiah’s day, and especially helps us as modern readers to be able to collate all of these poetic images together and understand: “Here’s what the message of Jeremiah is about.”

Typically these prose sermons are going to focus on the misunderstanding that the people of Judah have about their covenant with God. They have come to believe that God is going to protect them, God is going to bless them, God is going
to watch over them—no matter what! And the prose sermons provide a different understanding of the covenant: Jeremiah 7 is one of these summary passages. They have placed false confidence in the Temple and God’s presence there being able to protect them. Jeremiah 10, a prose sermon, explaining that Israel has violated the covenant by their idolatry. Jeremiah chapter 11, a prose sermon, saying Jeremiah is warning that the people of Judah are going to experience the covenant curses because of their disobedience. The covenant was not just designed just to protect them and bless them. Jeremiah 18 and 19, prose sermons, explain the fact that Judah has had the opportunity to repent. They have forfeited that opportunity and God is going to judge them.

So I believe that there is actually a unity that emerges from these different literary genres. We can see that as we look at how the prose, the poetry, the stories, the narratives, and the sermons interact with each other.

**Sources for the Composition of Jeremiah**

There is a second issue relating to the compositions of the book of Jeremiah, leaving behind some of the critical theories and things that are really a sort of precursor of this. Jeremiah is an interesting book, and that probably more than any of the other major prophets it gives us insight into the process that was involved in the formation of the book of Jeremiah as a book. In fact, there are references to five or six different sources and places where Jeremiah has actually composed parts of this book, or Baruch has composed parts of this book, and then these different scrolls and sources have been put together. The key passage in all of this is Jeremiah 36:1-3. In that particular passage, God commands Jeremiah to write down his messages and to dictate those messages to Baruch and then to have Baruch read those passages at the temple.

The year that this takes place is the fourth year of Jehoiakim. So what this means is that Jeremiah has been preaching for twenty plus years before he is ever specifically commanded to write down the words that he had been preaching. Now, I don’t think that means that Jeremiah never recorded this, but the actual
composing of these things into a book the first time we see that happening is twenty years into the ministry of Jeremiah.

If you know the chapter it happens that Jehoiakim cuts up the scroll and then after that, at the end of the chapter it says in verses 23-26, that God commanded Jeremiah and Baruch to compose another scroll. And it says they rewrote the scroll. Many people feel that the basic heart of the message that was found in this scroll is what we have in Jeremiah 1-25, in the words of the oracles and judgment that were found there. But it also says by one who wrote the second scroll that many similar words were added to that. I believe that we can imagine the first substantive composition of the book of Jeremiah happening in the twentieth year of his ministry. Then over the next twenty to thirty years of Jeremiah’s ministry, many similar words were added to those original words. There was a constant process of adding new messages, new sermons, and perhaps even casting old sermons in light of the exile and the things that happened at the end of Jeremiah’s ministry.

Second mention of a source that I want to call attention to is Jeremiah 29:1. It tells us that Jeremiah wrote a letter after 597 BC to the exiles who were in Babylon. That letter instructed them what God’s plans and God’s desire were for the future. Remember, he said, “pray for the peace of Babylon just as you pray for the peace of Jerusalem, settle in the land, build houses there,” do the normal things that you do with your families, “serve the king of Babylon, and things will go well for you. And then after seventy years God will release you, and God will send you back from exile,” that was in the letter that Jeremiah composed to the exiles. So we can imagine that some of the words of hope that promised that God gave through the Prophet Jeremiah may have come through that letter. That letter is the background to what Jeremiah has to say in chapter 29.

In Jeremiah chapter 30, we have very important section of the book in Jeremiah 30 to 33. It’s referred to as the “Book of Consolation.” It’s the message of hope that God gives through the Prophet Jeremiah. The amazing thing is that
Session 5: Composition of Jeremiah

this prophet who was commanded to give so many words of judgment put
consolation at the center of book of Jeremiah. There is a section of hope. But it
tells us that Jeremiah composed these positive messages of hope into a book or a
scroll. So we have to use our sanctified imagination here little bit, but I can
imagine that the chapter that was found in 30 and 31, which are poetry and 32 and
33, which are prose, may have originally stood as an independent unit. And they
were representatives of Jeremiah’s messages of hope.

A fourth scroll or a fourth source is mentioned for us in Jeremiah 51: 59-64.
In the last two primary chapters in the book of Jeremiah 50 and 51, we have the
oracles against Babylon. They are these long elaborate messages of judgment
against the people of Babylon and against the nation of Babylon and the king
whom God used to punish Israel. But at the end of the oracle, it tells us that
Seraiah, who appears to be the brother of Baruch and another scribe that assists
Jeremiah, actually took this scroll to Babylon with Zedekiah. When Zedekiah was
there for meeting with king of Babylon sometime before exile took place, it says,
Seraiah read the scroll in Babylon and then performed a symbolic act. He took the
scroll and tied a rock around it and then he threw the scroll into the Euphrates
River signifying the doomed the final destruction of a nation of Babylon. But
here’s another source, another scroll, again, not coming in from the editor, not
coming in from a later person but from Jeremiah himself.

In chapters 26 to 45, as we have already stated, we have a number of
biographical narratives and stories from Jeremiah. These stories conclude in
Jeremiah 45. There is a word of promise that’s given to Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch.
So I think there is the possibility rather than Jeremiah writing these as an
autobiography, there is a likelihood and possibility that Baruch was the one who
composed these stories about Jeremiah. The message of hope, the promise of
hope, that’s given to Baruch in chapter 45, functions as a qualifying or something
that identifies the author or the person that has a significant role in composing the
section of the book and pronounces God’s blessing on him. It’s like a postscript, or
in the Psalms where we have superscriptions that give us titles we could have that going on with Baruch in that chapter.

Then finally one of the other things that are interesting about the formation of the book of Jeremiah as a book is that we often see the duplication of certain passages from one part of a book and they are found in another part of the book. For example, Jeremiah chapter 23:20 says, “The anger of the Lord will not cease until he accomplishes all that he attended.” The same statement appears in the Book of Consolation in chapter 30, verse 24. Chapter 23 talks about Lord raising a righteous branch that will come out of the House of David. That passage is repeated in Jeremiah 53:15 and 16.

So I think again in this process Jeremiah and Baruch are recasting and coming to understand Jeremiah’s ministry in a deeper way. Or it could be that Jeremiah is ministering in a different context and in a different situation, and messages from various parts of his ministry may have been reused or reapplied to different context and situations. Some of the oracles of the judgment about Judah in the early parts of the book are reapplied and stated toward Babylon in a latter part of the book.

Early in Jeremiah, we have Jeremiah saying that God’s judgment is going to come in the form of an enemy from the North that’s going to attack Judah. In Jeremiah chapter 50 and 51, “there’s an enemy from the North that’s going to attack Babylon as well.” So Jeremiah, in a way that really is not true of any other book gives us insight into the way that different parts of Jeremiah’s message were composed in different scrolls, in different sources and then over a long process of Jeremiah’s life those were put into the form that we have them today. There’s the possibility that even after Jeremiah has died, that Baruch finishes this process or the editors responsible for bringing the entire Hebrew Canon together and giving it order and design may have had their hands in this process as well. But we believe, and this is a conviction that I have about this book as I study it, that God not only inspired Jeremiah in the preaching of this message; God also directed Jeremiah,
Baruch and any inspired editor who may have been involved in the process of the formation of that book as well. As difficult and as complex as this process may have been, God had his hand in this and God was preserving the message of Jeremiah in the form that he desired and designed, first for the people of Israel and then later for the church because of the ongoing message that this book has for us.

**Massoretic Text [MT], Septuagint [LXX] and the Dead Sea Scrolls [DSS]**

Now, there’s a final issue related to the book of Jeremiah that again think reflects the development and the formation of this book’s composition, and that’s the fact that our ancient copies and manuscripts of the book of Jeremiah reflect two very different versions of the book of Jeremiah. In one version of the book is reflected in the Greek translation of the Old Testament referred to as the Septuagint [LXX] and then the other version is reflected in the Hebrew text or the Masoretic Text [MT] of the book of Jeremiah and the form of Jeremiah that is found in our Hebrew Bibles. The Masoretic Text is also the basis for our English Bibles. So all of our English Bibles whether it is King James Version, ESV, NIV, NASB all of them are based on that Hebrew Masoretic Version of the book.

But as we look at the two different forms of the book of Jeremiah, one in the Septuagint, one in the Masoretic Text there are some very interesting differences in these two versions of the book. First of all, the Greek text in the Septuagint is 14% shorter than the version that we have in the Masoretic Text. So that means that there are at least or there are approximately 2700 words in the Masoretic Text that are not found in the Greek text. These words don’t substantively change the essence of Jeremiah’s ministry, but it does provide some different insights and different readings of various passages.

A second difference between the two texts is that the Greek text has a different order and arrangement. Our English Bibles are reflective of the Masoretic Text, the oracles that Jeremiah preached against the nations come at the end of the book in chapters 46-51. In the Greek version, those oracles come after chapter 25 verse 13, and so they are found in the middle of the book. The other
interesting thing is that the order of those oracles in the Greek version of Jeremiah is different from the one that we have in our Hebrew version and again our English bibles.

A third difference is that there are, at times, significant passages and the most famous or the most important example: Jeremiah 33 verse 14-26, we are talking about a significant section of the book that are found in the Hebrew version of the book but are missing in the Septuagint version of the book.

Finally, the last difference is that there are additions to the Masoretic Text, like headings and chapters 2, 7, 16, 27, where there is an introductory title given. There are expressions like “thus says the Lord” that appears 65 times more in the Masoretic Text than in the LXX. That indicates for us that the LXX likely reflects a more early version of the book with things that had been added to it by the Masoretic version.

When people first hear about this, it raises a couple of questions and I know that this is confusing for my students. Which one of these versions comes first? Which one of these is more original? Then the large question is: which one of these is the Word of God for us? We might think that it’s obvious that the Hebrew version is original because Jeremiah spoke in Hebrew. Greek is a translation but as we have already said, the things that are added and the additions in Jeremiah that are found in our Hebrew Bibles indicate that it is more likely that those things were added to an earlier version rather than something that was deleted or taken out.

We have also come to a better understanding of the book of Jeremiah through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls which moved our earliest versions of the Old Testament that we had back almost a thousand years. What we have come to understand from the Dead Sea scrolls is that they were likely Hebrew versions of Jeremiah in the early period that reflect what is found in both the Septuagint and the Masoretic text. In the fourth cave at Qumran, there were some important fragments and these are very tiny, small fragments of the book of
Jeremiah that were found there. The interesting thing is that two of these fragments, 4Q Jeremiah A and 4Q Jeremiah C, based on what’s there and again, tiny fragments, they seem to reflect what we have in our Masoretic text. On the other hand, another fragment of the book, 4Q Jeremiah B, found in the same cave seems to reflect the readings that we have in the LXX. So, what this suggests to us is that the changes that occur in the Greek are not the result of translating from Hebrew to Greek. They are not those kinds of changes, but it reflects that there was originally a Hebrew prototype for the Septuagint and a Hebrew version of the book that’s reflected in the Masoretic Text as well.

**Proposed Solution**

So should we be bothered by this? And how do we ultimately resolve this? I believe that these two versions are related to two specific issues. Number one, they are related to the length of Jeremiah’s ministry. Remember, his ministry occurs over a fifty-year period and so it is likely, again, that Jeremiah and Baruch may have had their hands significantly in the composition of both of these versions of the book. The LXX, perhaps, reflecting an earlier version of Jeremiah and then the MT reflecting the final form of the book of Jeremiah as Baruch, Jeremiah or any other inspired editors involved in this had God’s insight into the ultimate significance of Jeremiah’s ministry.

The other reality that gives rise to these two different versions is the fact that Jeremiah’s ministry occurs over a broad geographical area. In the days after the exile we have Jews who are in Babylon, we have Jews that are leading back in the land and ultimately Jeremiah, Baruch and the other refugees are living in Egypt. They do not have fax machines, they do not have printing presses, they do not have FedEx express where they can simply communicate and send things back and forth to each other. So I believe that these two different versions of the book of Jeremiah likely arose because of the different geographical locations in which the book was being read and produced.
So it’s likely that the LXX version was circulated in Egypt and it was an earlier form of the book of Jeremiah. The later the fuller book of Jeremiah and one that focuses more extensively on the exiles on Babylon, on the hope for Israel’s future was the one that circulated in Babylon and that was brought back to the land by the Jews became the primary version of the Jewish people.

My understanding of this is that we don’t really need to be bothered by the whole issue of which one of these is inspired. I believe that both of them reflect the Word of God. Another interesting issue is that as we move to the time of the New Testament, the Septuagint was the Bible in the Old Testament of the early church. The Masoretic Text was the Hebrew Canon for the Jews and the Rabbis. So many people have raised the question “Shouldn’t we be using the LXX as the Christian version of the book of Jeremiah?” Well, again, I believe the church was using the Septuagint because of the specific context that they were ministering in. They were ministering to people that spoke Greek. They were not making a statement about the superiority of the LXX version of Jeremiah to the MT [Masoretic Text]. It’s simply the version that communicated most effectively to the culture that they were in. I believe that both of them accurately reflect the word of God. I believe that as scholars examine and study the book of Jeremiah it often is important for them to compare the two different versions, perhaps to understand how the book has developed or perhaps to understand a better reading in a specific text or passage but ultimately God was directing this entire process from the time of the early version of Jeremiah, composed at some point in his ministry to the final reflections of Jeremiah and Baruch about what Jeremiah had to say about the future of Israel and God’s restoration.

For example, remember that one of the passages that are not found in the Septuagint is Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 14-26. When we look at this passage and see what it’s talking about, it’s dealing with the future of the House of David and it repeats the passage found in Jeremiah chapter 23, “God is going to raise up a righteous branch for David.” It says that David will never lack a man to sit on the
throne. So it was important in the context of the exile for the people that were living in Babylon, it was important for them to understand that there was hope based on the promises that God had made to David.

That passage also says the Levites will never lack a man to execute the office of priesthood. As the people were living in exile and as they would come back to the land and rebuild the temple, it was important for them to understand God was going to restore the worship that had taken place at the temple. God is going to restore the Levites and the priesthood and all of those things that are important to Israel’s future when the second temple is built. So both of these versions of the book of Jeremiah are inspired. They simply reflect the message of Jeremiah at different times and from different perspectives in his ministry.

To wrap all this up, and we’ve covered a lot in this particular session dealing with the composition of the book. Andrew Shead has a quote about the Masoretic Text and why it’s important for us as Christians and why I think it’s likely that as God was directing the process of Jeremiah being formed to Scripture that this became the canonical book of Jeremiah in the Hebrew canon. Shead says this: “the Masoretic text has a special place for us as Jeremiah’s words to us. Not only was it his last and final version, but its target audience, the exilic community in Babylon was, in Jeremiah’s eyes, the one group of people with a future in the divine plan of salvation. The seeds of the church were planted in Babylonian soil. And so as we look at the hope that Jeremiah is giving to us about the exiles and about the return from exile in salvation history that ultimately is the seed of the church. God’s people are going to come back from exile and God is going to raise up Jesus to bring the ultimate restoration from exile.”

So it’s very important for us to understand in the final form of the book of Jeremiah and the fact that God was talking about the restoration of his people. Going back to chapter 24, the good figs were the people that were living in Babylon. Not because of their righteousness but because of the hope that God was placing on them being the ones who would come back from the exile and that God
would bring them back to the land. The bad figs were those that remained in the land and the final form of Jeremiah is going to stress the hope for Israel’s future is not with the people who live in the land. The hope for Israel’s future is not with the exiles that are living in Egypt. The hope for Israel’s future is with the exiles in Babylon and God is fulfilling the covenant promises that he's made to David and to Israel and to his people. Jeremiah, with all of the judgment that is there, the final form of that book is emphasizing that hope and that consolation and the restoration that’s going to come in the future.

Summary

As we’ve looked at the composition of the book of Jeremiah, we’ve focused on three specific issues today. We’ve talked about the different types of material and the reasons why the book of Jeremiah is made up of both prose and poetry. We’ve talked about the evidence within the book itself that Jeremiah was composed from different sources, different scrolls that were put and placed together, but again Jeremiah and Baruch are the ones who had a major hand in this process. Then finally we’ve looked at the different versions of Jeremiah that are reflected in the ancient manuscripts. First of all the Septuagint and the MT [Masoretic Text] and tried to come to an understanding again that this is pointing us to the fact that there has been growth and development in the book of Jeremiah. But ultimately this book is a unity that reflects God’s message of judgment and hope for the people of Israel.
This is Doctor Gary Yates in his teaching on the book of Jeremiah. This is session 6, an overview of the book of Jeremiah.

In our last session we talked about the formation and composition of the book of Jeremiah, the process that God used to bring the book of Jeremiah about. God inspired the book, God inspired the prophet both in his spoken word and his written word, but the book was not something that simply fell out of the sky and there was a process involved. To further help us to understand the book of Jeremiah as a book, I’d like to give an overview of the book of Jeremiah in this session where we understand the larger message of the book and how it all fits together as a unit. Sometimes when we’re studying the Bible we pull out individual passages from a book and as you’re reading this book you may find certain passages that are more interesting to you than others. But it’s important to see the forest as well as the trees. I believe that when we understand how the book fits together as a unit, we will have a better understanding of the individual passages that are there as well.

I’m going to remind you of a couple of quotes from our last lesson that, Jeremiah is definitely a difficult book. You may be feeling that, you may be experiencing that as you’re reading through it and studying it in connection with this study as I reference things very quickly sometimes in the videos. You may be saying, “Where is that? How can I find that?” But remember what Andrew Shead says in his book *A Mouth Full of Fire*, Jeremiah is long, full of repetitions, non-linear in its chronology, and constantly cycling from one genre to another; and then R.P. Carroll in his more cynical way, “to the modern reader the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are virtually incomprehensible as books. The person who is not confused by the book of Jeremiah has not understood it.” So, if people
are making those kinds of statements you may be asking the question: “How can I ever understand the book of Jeremiah? How can this book that seems so strange, put together in such a different way from the books that we read, how can I understand it?” I’m convinced that the book of Jeremiah is probably not like any book that you have on your Kindle right now.

So, I want to give us an understanding of how to read this as a unit, how to understand it as a book. The book of Jeremiah is very different from Paul’s epistles, the book of Jeremiah is different from the Gospels, the book of Jeremiah is even different from the different books that maybe you’re more familiar with in the Old Testament like Genesis or Psalms or Proverbs. But there is a unity that emerges out of this book that I think helps us to understand it. Again, critical scholars have wanted to view the book as disorderly, as confusing, as something that has been put together in a rather a haphazard way.

William McKane, who was the author of the International Critical Commentary on Jeremiah, a very important commentary on the book, he refers to it as rolling corpus in a sense. He compares the book of Jeremiah to a snowball rolling down a hill. What you have in this rolling corpus is that basically the earlier messages of the book of Jeremiah as they grow and develop; they accumulate material like a snowball rolling down a hill. Now, I think you’re fairly aware of the fact that a snowball rolling down the hill is not designed very cohesively and yet that’s his understanding of the book of Jeremiah.

Walter Brueggemann, I think reflecting a very postmodern approach to the book, sees the influence of various editors and redactors in the book of Jeremiah and basically what he understands the book to be is that there is this cacophony of all these different voices who have different perspectives on the suffering of the exile, the political crisis that is going on. What happens to this group of people, and these refugees, and this exile? When is God going to bring the people back? And again developing over a long period of time the book of Jeremiah in a sense is all of these discordant voices and somehow the word of God emerges out of that. I
believe that if we are convinced that Jeremiah is the word of God, and that it’s inspired by God, then God has directed this book as it was put together and there is going to be a much more orderly message that emerges from it. Now, that doesn’t diminish the difficulties of putting this book together. It doesn’t diminish the fact that the book is not put together in a chronological way like we’re used to reading books, but there is an order and a design that’s reflected behind this. Louis Stulman, as he’s dealing with the book of Jeremiah, refers to and describes the book in this way: “it is a reflection of order amid chaos.” In some sense, perhaps the apparent disorder, as we look at the book of Jeremiah, may in fact be a reflection of the times in which Jeremiah is living. So we have these discorded images and we have these different genres being imposed one over the top of each other in a sense to reflect the time period in which Jeremiah lives.

There are places in the book of Jeremiah where it’s very confusing to try to follow the chronology because Jeremiah seems to be in these various prisons and different locations and you may be reading through the book and asking the question: “How did he get from this prison to that prison? and “Why isn’t there an explanation of that?” But, in a sense, that reflects the disorder of Jeremiah’s life and it reflects the disorder of a man who often has to preach on the run or a man who has to record the scroll of his prophecies and then go into hiding because it’s not safe for him to appear in public. It reflects what happens to a man who’s in prison until the time that the city in Jerusalem is captured and then the capture of that city becomes his release from prison. So there’s order amid chaos.

**Jeremiah 1:9 and the Book of Jeremiah**

A verse that is helped me to understand the progression and the development of the book of Jeremiah is found right at the very beginning of the book in Jeremiah 1:9. And what we have in Jeremiah 1:9 is the Lord says to the prophet, “I have put my words in your mouth;” and then in verse 10, “See I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms.”
Then he gives us six verbs that describe the message and the ministry of Jeremiah. Here is what your words are designed to do: They are designed “to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, and to build and to plant.”

Jeremiah was a prophet to both Judah and the nations, “I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah doesn’t just speak about Judah and Israel, Jeremiah speaks about Egypt, Babylon, the Ammonites, the Edomites, the people that lived around Israel. His message extends beyond Israel and so there are parts of the book that are going to focus on Jeremiah as a prophet to Israel and Judah that’s the primary focus in chapters 1 to 45. But there is also going to be a focus on Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations and chapters 46 to 51 are going to give us the oracles that Jeremiah speaks against those people. Chapter 25 provides a summary and a conclusion of the first section of the book and a hinge into the second section of the book. It is again going to focus on how his message relates to the nations. So, understanding that Jeremiah is a prophet to Israel and to the nations helps us to understand the design and the order of the book. Then we go back to these six verbs: “to pluck up, to break down, to destroy, to overthrow, to build and to plant. Those verbs are going to appear at various places in the book of Jeremiah as summaries of both his message of judgment and his promises of salvation. They're going to be in chapter 25, they're going to be in chapter 31, they're going to be in chapter 45 and depending on whether those sections are dealing with judgment or salvation, those verbs are going to be used to summarize what the message of Jeremiah is all about. So as we're looking at this, we begin to structure, we begin to order Jeremiah's message by understanding that he is a prophet of judgment and a prophet of salvation. God is going to judge Judah, he's going to destroy them for their covenant infidelity. But then Jeremiah is also a prophet of salvation. God is going to restore Israel; God is going to judge their enemies; and God is going to ultimately make things right. Just understanding that basic conception of the book of Jeremiah gives us in part the structure of what the
Session 6: Overview of Jeremiah

The book is about.

Stulman again in his book, *Order Amid Chaos*, says chapters 1 to 25, the first half of the book, are basically dealing with Jeremiah's ministry of tearing down and plucking up the old world and the old order and all of the things that belonged to Israel's past history. God is uprooting that. In a sense, God is overturning the covenant promises that he's made to Israel and instead is bringing on them the covenant punishments. The things that Israel has trusted in to provide security in their relationship with God, those things are being torn down and plucked up in chapters 1 to 25.

But in the second half of the book, there's going to be an emphasis on God building and planting. There's going to be the judgment of exile. There's going to be the narrative in chapters 37-44 a focus on the events that happened in Jeremiah's life surrounding the fall of Jerusalem. There is a much greater emphasis in the second half of the book on the building up, the new covenant and how God is going to bring the people back to the land. So, in a sense, as you're working through the book of Jeremiah, remember that the first half of the book, chapters 1 to 25, there's a focus on tearing down and plucking up. In the second half of the book, in chapters 26 and 52, the actual tearing down occurs, but in the midst of that it shows us how God is going to rebuild and replant his city and his people and what he's going to do for them after the judgment takes place.

“The Word of the Lord” in Jeremiah

Now I believe that we can further divide the book. We've got the tearing down of the old order in the first half, we've the rebuilding of the new order in the second half, I believe that we can actually see more specific sections in order to the book and let me just mention a couples of those. Andrew Shead again in his book *A Mouth Full of Fire*, which I think is one of the best theological studies of the book of Jeremiah that I've read, talks about the fact that the book of Jeremiah is a story, not just about the life of a prophet, but it's the story about the word of God beyond the idea of there being the first half of the book that deals with tearing
down and uprooting and the second half of the book that deals with building up and planting again. I think that we can see more specific divisions and more specific ways that the book of Jeremiah is arranged and structured. Andrew Shead in his book *A Mouth Full of Fire* says that the story of the book of Jeremiah is essentially a story of the word of God. It's not just the life of Jeremiah, it's not a biography of Jeremiah, but it's the story of what happens when the word of God becomes a fire in Jeremiah's bones. He begins to preach that and communicate that. What happens to that word as it's going out? So Jeremiah in a sense becomes a living representation of the word of God. He becomes an embodiment of that word and so the things that happened to Jeremiah, the various forms of persecution, the oppression, being thrown in a dungeon, being threatened with his life, it reflects how people react to the word of God. It's also the word of God that brings about the fall of Jerusalem. God fulfills his prophetic word, and then it's the word of God that gives hope to the people of Israel for their future that God has not abandoned them.

So Shead explains that the book of Jeremiah is structured around 14 or 15 different units that are introduced by various forms of the expression, "the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah." So you can see these, there are three of them in Jeremiah 1:4, 1:11, chapter 13, chapter 2, chapter 7, chapter 11 and on and on. So as you're reading through the book of Jeremiah, pay attention to both the larger sections and the smaller sections that are introduced in some way set off by, "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah." Sometimes determining where one oracle begins or where one sermon begins and where does another one conclude is different? Often those types of expressions are there to help us and to guide us. So I think that's an important structural marker in the book.

**Three Major Divisions of Jeremiah**

The other important thing to understand is that the book further breaks down into three major sections of text, and in fact I think, a good thing for anyone
beginning to study the book of Jeremiah is just to remember the chapter divisions and a basic division for these three major sections of text.

The first major division is found in chapters 1 to 25, and we can summarize that section very simply: it is primarily Jeremiah's oracles and messages of judgment against the people of Judah and Jerusalem. He is announcing the coming judgment that God is going to bring against the city of Judah.

The second section, chapters 26-45, has different types of material, because now, we are primarily going to have stories and episodes from the life of Jeremiah. Again the purpose of this is not to give us a biography of Jeremiah's life; it's not to give us a travel log of his experiences. But it's to reflect for us the fact that Judah did not obey the word of the Lord. A recurring expression that's going to be in this section of the book is: "they did not obey, they did not listen to the word of God." There are going to be various stories where Jeremiah is going to teach or preach the word of God, he's going to announce a message that God has given to him and we're going see the responses of various groups of people. Typically the response is going to be a negative one where they do not listen to what God has to say through the prophet.

The final section of the book, the third major section is found in chapters 46 to 51. There's a clear transition here, it's easy to see because Jeremiah moves from his messages of judgment, the experiences of judgment that Judah experiences, and these are the messages that Jeremiah preached against the nations.

Finally, the last thing that we have in the book is chapter 52. It is a postscript. It's an appendix. It's the story of the fall of Jerusalem in 586-87 BC. I think it's there to remind us that even at the close of Jeremiah's ministry, the thing that is looming large over Israel's history is the fall of the city of Jerusalem. In the return, the people may have come back to the land, but the exile in a sense is ongoing until the time that God fully restores them. The exile, the fall of Jerusalem, was the key event that validated and confirmed Jeremiah's ministry and his message as a prophet. It was the proof that his message was what God exactly
wanted to say to the people and so that's there as an appendix or a postscript to the book.

So once we understand these three sections, 1 to 25, 26 to 45, 46 to 51 with the final postscript (ch. 52), I think again there is order that emerges out of the chaos. Even though there is non-chronology here, we can begin to see a basic unity in this book.

**Jeremiah’s oracles of Judgment (chs. 1-25): Accusation and Indictment**

Now let’s go back to the first section, Jeremiah’s oracles of judgment. In this section, there are going to be two primary things. There’s two primary words that if you can remember these I think you understand what’s in this section. There is going to be accusation and there is going to be indictment. The accusation deals with the fact that Jeremiah, as he is preaching this message of judgment, is not just telling the people that God is going to judge them, he is explaining the reasons why that judgment is occurring. What have they done? How have they violated the covenant? That’s the accusation. The indictment has to do with the specific judgment that God is going to bring against his people. In what ways will God judge them? What are the specific things that are going to happen to them because of God’s judgment?

So let’s summarize some of the key passages that talk about God’s indictment of Israel. Going back again to the early section of the book, chapter two. I think this is a formative message for the book as a whole. There’s a charge about the idolatry of the people, and the fact that the people have committed two evils. “They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters. They have hewed out for themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water.” I mean the most despicable, desperate thing that Israel has done and Judah has done, is they have abandoned God and they have begun to worship other idols. In a sense idolatry is the ultimate sin because it’s a sin of disloyalty. It’s a sin of a broken relationship. It’s a sin where they have been unfaithful to God in a very personal way. But it becomes the root in the base of all of their other sins as well.
In chapter 2, verse 20, an image that is going to work its way throughout the book, “For long ago I broke your yoke, I burst your bonds but you said, ‘I will not serve.’ Yes, on every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down like a whore.” So Jeremiah is going to portray the people as God’s unfaithful wife. They are a prostitute who has been unfaithful to the Lord. Imagine if our pastor were to stand up and confront us that way on a Sunday morning. What would our reaction be? But that’s an image that is going to work itself throughout the entire book of Jeremiah.

The indictment continues in Chapter 7. I think one of the most famous parts and components of Jeremiah’s ministry was the day that he stood up and he preached his famous “Temple Sermon.” The courage it took for Jeremiah to stand up and say to the people: you’ve sinned, you’ve broken the covenant and as a result of that, this temple that you think guarantees your protection, that you think guarantees God is always going to bless you, you have turned this temple into a den of thieves. In a sense, by your covenant unfaithfulness, the temple has become a hideout for Bonnie and Clyde. Because of that, God is going to destroy the temple. God is going to bring it down.

Chapter 10, is another indictment, another sermon, that Jeremiah preaches: “They have worshiped the idols and these idols are as worthless and as lifeless as scarecrows in a melon patch” (Jer. 10:5). Chapter 11 is a sermon that Jeremiah preaches. “The people have broken the covenant. They have not kept the terms of the covenant.” The covenant is not just about God’s blessing, it also was about the responsibilities that God has placed upon them as his covenant people. So at the end of this sermon, near the end of this in chapter 11 verses 10 and 11: “They have turned back to the iniquities of their fore fathers. They have refused to hear my words, they have gone after other gods to serve them, the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant I made with their fathers, therefore, thus says the Lord, ‘Behold I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape.’”
Looking at the idea of indictment in the first section of the book, we can move to chapters 22 and chapter 23. We were looking at the history and the background of Jeremiah. We looked at chapter 22, the failures of Judah’s final kings and remember Jeremiah begins under the godly reign of Josiah but very quickly there is the ungodly reign of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Every one of them did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord indicts their leadership. The problems that Judah had, the sin that had come into Judah’s life as a nation, in many ways, was caused by bad leadership that had turned away from God. So, chapter 22 indicts their kings and their leaders.

In chapter 23, we have an indictment of the prophets. The spiritual leaders in Israel were as much a problem as the civil leaders. The prophets and the priest both had abandoned their responsibility to teach the word of God. The problem with the prophets particularly in chapter 23 is that they are preaching a message that is a reflection of their own dreams and their own ideas and their own perspectives on what’s going on in Israel’s history. They are not the word of the Lord. And the Lord says, I am going to bring judgment on these prophets because number one, I did not send them. They have not stood in the counsel of the Lord. They have not received a message from me and yet they are proclaiming this message.

Then, finally, in chapter 25 this section concludes by God saying that he is going to cause the people of Judah to drink the wine of his judgment and that judgment is going to come at the hands of the Babylonians.

**Vivid Descriptions of Judgment**

So throughout this section, chapters one to twenty-five, there is an emphasis on indictment. But once the indictment is made and once it becomes clear and obvious in Jeremiah’s ministry that there is not going to be repentance, there also is the idea of this specific announcement of how God is going to bring that judgment. What we have in chapters 1 to 25 again, often using very vivid and powerful poetry and images is that there are going to be descriptions of the
specific type of judgment that God is going to bring against the people. The announcement of this coming judgment, this powerful army, is going to sweep through the land of Israel and through the land of Judah and they are going to attack the southern kingdom and send them away into exile. I think it is interesting that in the book of Jeremiah, as this accusation begins to come into play, that Jeremiah, first of all, does not identify the specific nation that God is going to bring against them. In a sense, it adds to the mystery that there’s this army that that you cannot politically find on a map and talk to and identify, but there’s an army that is coming to attack you. The prophet describes this army in the most vivid, powerful way possible because if the people can somehow understand how awful and terrible this judgment is going to be, then maybe they will respond and they will repent and they will turn from their sinful ways.

So after the accusation and the indictment there are these descriptions of the judgment and of the army that is going to come, particularly in Jeremiah chapter 4 and 5. Here’s a description of the attack; here’s the specific way that God is going to judge the people of Judah. It says this: “Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem and say this: ‘blow the trumpet through the land, cry aloud and say, ‘Assemble and let us go into the fortified cities. Raise a standard to the Zion, flee for safety, stay not, for I the Lord am bringing disaster from the north. A lion has gone up from his thicket, a destroyer of nations has set out; he has gone up from his place to make your land a waste; your cities will be ruined without inhabitant. For this put on sackcloth, lament and wail for the fierce anger of the Lord has not turned back from us.’” You can imagine a scene of national disaster. The people are assembling into the fortified cities because an enemy is coming to attack them, and this enemy is like a lion. Again it’s not something or someone that Judah can identify. It’s this mysterious army that’s coming against them.

There’s another description chapter 4 verse 13, “Behold, he comes up like clouds; his chariots are like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles--woe to us, for we are ruined.” And if you can somehow place yourself in the city of
Jerusalem, imagine what it would be like to be under enemy attack at that time. You can get an idea of what Jeremiah is warning the people of. Chapter 5, verses 15 and 17: “The Lord says, ‘Behold I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel,’ declares the Lord, ‘It is an enduring nation; it is an ancient nation, it is a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb; they are all mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food; they shall eat up your sons and your daughters; they shall eat up your flocks and your herds; they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees; your fortified cities and what you trust they shall beat you down with their sword.’” So again it’s describing that this is going to be a terrible, awful judgment. We need to repent, we need to change our ways. But the amazing thing is, that in spite of these portrayals of what the judgment would look like, the form that it would take and the specific announcement that’s coming here, yet the people don’t respond and don’t repent of that.

Finally, in chapter 20, Babylon is identified as the specific nation that God will bring against the people of Judah. In chapter 25, again the concluding summary for this section, it’s an important chapter in the book. Imagine it as a hinge that takes us from section one into section two. There is this message about Babylon in Jer. 25:11. “This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and the nations shall serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. Then after the seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,’ declares the Lord, ‘making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon the land all of the words which I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.’”

So, this is Jeremiah’s message. I think an anthology, Jeremiah’s greatest hits, describing for us all of the warnings that Jeremiah has been giving to the people from 626 BC until the time that the city of Jerusalem is going to fall. These are the types of messages that Jeremiah’s been preaching. When the Lord tells
Jeremiah to compose on a scroll in 605 BC all of the words that he’s been preaching against the people of Judah, Jeremiah 1-25 for us is a representative example of what this message was like. It’s not necessarily the exact words, it’s not necessarily every sermon that Jeremiah preached, but this is Jeremiah’s message of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. The accusation, the indictment, “this is what you have done,” and then the announcement, “this is what God is going to do to you. This is the judgment that’s going to come.”

**Jeremiah 26-45: Narratives in Jeremiah’s Life**

Then in chapter 26 to 45 we transition into a new set of material, primarily narratives from the prophet’s life. In chapter 37 to 44 is the closest thing we have to a chronology in the book. It is the story of what happened in the days immediately before the fall of Jerusalem and then what happens in Judah immediately after that. It narrates what took place in Jeremiah’s life, but more importantly, what took place in the lives of the nation of Judah in its last days. What we have in this last section is the warnings of judgment are coming in chapters 1 to 25. The fulfillment of that judgment actually comes in the story of 37 to 44.

But along with that, these narratives from the prophet’s life are again emphasizing one key idea: the people did not listen to the word of the Lord. They did not pay attention to the messages of judgment that Jeremiah was preaching. Part of the explanation of the book of Jeremiah as to why the exile occurred is that the people didn’t listen to God’s word. The exile did not occur because God abandoned his people. The exile did not occur because the Lord in some way had been unfaithful to his covenant promises. The exile did not occur because the armies of Babylon were greater than the Lord who was the God of Israel. The exile occurred specifically because the people did not listen to God’s word.

In this section of the book, there are the various forms of persecution and opposition that Jeremiah experiences: he’s thrown in prison; he’s threatened with death; he’s thrown into a cistern; he’s taken away and kidnapped and sent to Egypt...
as a refugee. All of these things are a reflection of how the people did not listen to God’s word. Jeremiah and how they treat him represents how they respond to the word of God. In a sense he is the living expression of God’s word and every form of abuse that Jeremiah experiences is a reflection of how his message and God’s word was rejected.

We have this comment in chapter 37 verses 1 and 2. In many ways this summarizes everything that we see in 26 to 45 in these particular stories. Chapter 37 verse 1 says, “Zedekiah, the son of Josiah,” remember he’s the last king of Judah, “whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon made king of the land of Judah reigned instead of Coniah [or Jehoiachin] the son of Jehoiakim. But neither he, nor his servants, nor the people of the land, listened to the words of the Lord that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet.” Part of the issue is the kings of Israel or the kings of Judah did not listen. Jehoiakim and Zedekiah primarily in this section, they did not listen to the word of God. His officials, the military officers in particular, did not listen to the word of God. They hated Jeremiah, they viewed him as a traitor. They’d say, “we have got to get him out of earshot of the people because we don’t want them hearing his message that our resistance is futile,” but the people themselves did not listen to God’s word as well. So as a result of this, Judah is guilty before God. They have violated the covenant for hundreds of years. They have worshiped idols, but adding to that guilt is that when God sent a prophet warning them of the judgment that was coming, they did not listen.

Rejection of the Word of God in Chapters 26 and 36

Now I think, two of the most notable examples of people not listening to the word of God are found in chapter 26 and chapter 36. Chapter 26, I think, is a second form of Jeremiah’s “Temple Sermon” that is preached in chapter 7. If it’s not the same sermon, it’s very close. We have the response and the reaction of various groups of people, and as soon as Jeremiah preaches this message, it tells us that the spiritual leaders and the people said, “You are to die because you have prophesied that God is going to destroy his own house.” They viewed him as a
false prophet. Now the people ultimately come to acknowledge that Jeremiah is a true prophet, but there’s no indication of any kind of specific action that speaks of how they responded to the word of God.

Immediately after the Temple Sermon in chapter 26, we have King Jehoiachin putting to death the prophet Uriah. So this story, right at the beginning of the section is about how the people ignored God’s word.

Then I think the second sort of prime example of not listening to the word of God is that we have the story of Jehoiachin cutting up, burning, and destroying the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophesies in chapter 36. Jeremiah commissions Baruch, “write these words down, go to the temple and proclaim the message.” There are a number of officials who realize this is important. They take it to the king, he cuts it up, he burns it in the fire. In a sense that encapsulates the response of Judah to the word of God, “we don’t want to hear it.” As a result of that, that’s the reason for the destruction and that’s the reason for the events that take place in chapters 37 to 44.

**Book of Consolation (Jer 30-33)**

Now if you’re familiar with the book of Jeremiah, you know that in chapters 26 to 45 there’s another important message. There’s a specific section that we need to isolate within chapters 26 to 45 and that’s the Book of Consolation in chapters 30 to 33. That’s the message, really in a sense that stands at the center of the book. We imagine as Jeremiah and Baruch are putting it together that they want to highlight the fact that judgment is not God’s final word. So in the midst of all these stories about the rejection of God’s word, in the midst of all these stories of how Jeremiah is persecuted and opposed, there’s a statement at the center that God is not finished with his people. God is not going to abandon them. God is ultimately going to restore them. God is going to make a new covenant with Israel. God is going to write his law on their hearts. So instead of there being this continuing history of disobedience, when God restores his people in the future, they’re going to be able to obey. They will listen to God’s word and they will
follow him. This message of hope, I think, is all the more amazing, it’s all the more incredible, all the brighter and promising, in light of the fact that it’s surrounded by disobedience and judgment. So as you read the book of Jeremiah, keep your focus on the fact that at the center of the book there’s a message of hope.

**Judgment on the Nations (Jer 46-51)**

Then, finally, in chapters 46 through 51 we’ll just briefly summarize the section- we have the judgment of the nations. As I look at this section, I notice that this section is framed around the judgment of two superpowers. We have the judgment of Egypt at the beginning of this section and then we have the judgment of Babylon in chapters 50 and 51. Between that we have the judgment of all of the smaller nations and nation-states that surrounded the people of Judah. All of them answer to God. All of them are ultimately accountable to God and have received the judgment of the superpowers, Egypt and Babylon. In the last parts of the section, we are reminded that no nation is too great that it can avoid answering to God. If the nations and the states and the powers and the empires of that day answer to God, then the empires and the great nations of today will as well. But in between that, the smaller city-states remind us that no nation is too small that God ignores them. No nation is too small that they can avoid God’s judgment because he will overlook them. So God’s judgment is going to take place. God is going to judge the nations and there is a plan that is laid out in the book of Jeremiah where God judges Israel first and then he judges Babylon. God uses Babylon as his instrument of judgment. Nebuchadnezzar is his servant. But the final word is God makes things right. The things that Judah experienced at the hands of Babylon ultimately are going to be turned back against the Babylonians themselves. God is going to make things right.

**Hope for the Nations and Zion**

Finally, the last thing that I’d like to notice in this section is that the message that God has for the nations is not just one of judgment. There are
actually promises that are given to three of these nations that God is going to restore their fortunes. That’s the same expression that is used in chapters 30 to 33 to explain what God is going to do for Israel. At the beginning of chapter 30, “I am going to restore the fortunes of Israel after I have judged them.” In other words, I’m going to bring them back from captivity. In chapter 33 at the end of the Book of Consolation, again this promise. “I am going to restore the fortunes of Israel.” The amazing thing as we look at the judgment of the nations is that God’s plan is not just to destroy the nations themselves, some of these nations are also given the hope that the Lord is going to restore them as well. So in chapter 48, verse 47 the Lord says to Moab “After I have judged you; I will restore your fortunes.” To the people of Ammon in chapter 49, verse 6 “After I have judged you, I am going to restore your fortunes.” So there is the possibility that in the time of God’s kingdom when God restores the people of Israel these nations will be included.

But as we look at the warnings to Babylon, there is no hope, there’s no promise given to them. It is simply a message of total destruction and the purpose of this ultimately was that God was promising the restoration of his people. I want to close by reading chapter 50 verses 4 and 5 concerning the hope that emerges for Israel in realizing that God would one day ultimately judge their nations. The Lord says this: “In those days and at that time,’ declares the Lord, ‘the people of Israel and the people of Judah shall come together, weeping as they come, and they shall seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion with faces turned toward it, saying ‘Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten.’” God’s purpose in judging the nations was not just to vent his anger but it was ultimately to bring about the restoration of his people and to bring into play the future kingdom when all of the nations would be included in what God had planned for Israel.

We understand the book of Jeremiah in a better way when we understand its order. Jeremiah is a prophet of judgment and of salvation. I often tell my
students that if anyone ever asked you, on an ordination exam, the message of an Old Testament prophet, you could probably get by simply by saying they preached judgment and salvation. That’s very true of Jeremiah. He tears down, he destroys, he uproots, but he plants and he rebuilds.

The book of Jeremiah is also built around three sections: 1) chapters 1 to 25, we have his messages of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem; 2) chapters 26 through 45, we have the story of how Judah did not obey the word of the Lord; and then 3) chapters 46 to 51, we have the oracles against the nations of how God would judge Israel but then he would judge their enemies. The book of Jeremiah is built around the idea of judgment and salvation.
Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Session 7

© 2013, Dr. Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt

The Call of Jeremiah (Jer 1)

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is Session #7, Jeremiah Chapter 1: The Call of Jeremiah.

Review

Our current session is going to focus on Jeremiah chapter 1 and the calling of Jeremiah as a prophet. We'll also be looking at ways that Jeremiah 1, as the opening chapter of the book of Jeremiah, is also an introduction to message of the book as a whole.

We've taken some time in our earlier sessions to get the big picture, sort of the playing ground of Jeremiah. We've taken time to look at Jeremiah in light of the message and the theology of the prophets. We took some time to look at the historical background. First of all, what was Jeremiah's perspective on the international scene and things that were happening with regard to Babylon? We also looked at Jeremiah’s interaction in the domestic scene with the five last kings of Judah and how God is bringing about the collapse and the fall of the house of David because of its unfaithfulness. In our last two sessions, we looked more at Jeremiah as a book and thought about the composition of the book--the way that it was written and the way it was put together. Then in our last section, we talked about the arrangement of the book of Jeremiah and how the book is arranged according to three sections. We have the words of judgment in chapters 1-25; we have the stories of Judah's rejection of the word of God in 26-45, and then we have the oracles against the nation in 46-51.

Jeremiah 1

In Jeremiah chapter 1, we have the beginning point, not just of the book, but of Jeremiah's ministry because we have the story of Jeremiah's calling. In chapter one verse one, we have this statement: “The words of Jeremiah, the son of
Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.” As we look at just that brief biographical statement, an identifying summary about Jeremiah's life, I'm reminded of the fact that God calls a specific individual and God calls a human being, who in many ways was just like us, the weaknesses, the passions of an individual. God is going to call this individual, Jeremiah, to maybe one of the most difficult ministries that anyone has ever encountered.

Jeremiah’s Personal Background

Just some quick things about Jeremiah as an individual that I think is important for us to remember. First, Jeremiah is from the town of Anathoth; it's mentioned in verse 1. Anathoth was a small village about 3 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Joshua 21:8 tells us that it was one of the 48 cities that was given to the Levites. Second, it also tells us in verse one that Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah and Hilkiah was a priest. That meant that Jeremiah was from a priestly family. Maybe as a young man as he was thinking about and mapping out the plans for his life, he was thinking about serving the Lord in the capacity of the priest in the way his father had. But Numbers 4:3 seems to indicate that a priest began serving at the age of 30, and so Jeremiah never had the opportunity to do that; God had some other plans in mind for him. The third thing that we see in the calling of Jeremiah as an individual is he's going to say in verse 6, when God calls him, "Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." Jeremiah was called to be a prophet at a very young age. We don't know exactly what age Jeremiah was, but he began his ministry in 626 BC, in the thirteenth year of Josiah. His ministry is going to extend until about 580. Jeremiah has a ministry of almost 50 years. So we can imagine that he's very young at the time of his calling. He says "I'm but a youth. I don't know how to speak."

Now when Jeremiah says "I am but a youth," he uses the word $na \text{'ar}$, and that word has a wide range of meaning and usage. It can refer to a child that's an infant, or it can refer to someone who is an older boy. In Genesis chapter 22, it's the word that's used for Isaac when God commands Abraham to sacrifice him. We
know that Isaac is at least old enough to help his father carry the implements for the sacrifice as they're going up to the mountain. But the word na'ar can also refer to a young man who is old enough to marry, or someone who is a servant or someone who is old enough to go into war. We don't know exactly the age that Jeremiah is as he says this, but whatever age he is, Jeremiah believes that he's too young to do what God has called him to do. "I am but a child, Lord. I don't know how to speak."

Jeremiah and His Family

Another thing about the calling of Jeremiah, related to his personal life, is that part of God's calling on Jeremiah's life meant that the Lord would ask him not to marry or to have children. And so, in Jeremiah 16:1-4, here's another aspect of the calling of Jeremiah. It says there, "The word of the Lord came to me: You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and the daughters who are born in this place and concerning the mothers who bore them and the fathers who fathered them in this land: They shall die of deadly diseases."

So, the Lord, and this is probably conveyed at a later time in Jeremiah's ministry, did not allow Jeremiah to marry or have children. Jeremiah's family life was going to become a sign to the people of Israel that they were going to be deprived of family. We're reminded of the fact that the Lord often uses the family situations or the children of prophets to convey a message to the people of Israel. The prophet Isaiah had a son named Shear-jashub that gave a message of hope to Israel, but he also had a son named Maher-shalal-hash-baz that talked about judgment that was going to come. The names of his sons conveyed a sign to the people of Israel. The prophet Hosea was commanded to marry a woman who was going to be unfaithful to him and they would give birth to children that were reflective of that broken relationship and the names of those children also conveyed something. The prophet Ezekiel was told that his wife was going to die.
when the city of Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians and he was not allowed to grieve or mourn as a message to the people. So, I think we see one of the most difficult components of the prophet's ministry is that often their families were involved in the message that God wanted to convey to the people. And so Jeremiah, can you imagine this, with all of the struggles, with all of the things he's going to go through, he never had the encouragement or the blessing of knowing family.

I think about my own wife, and my three children, they are the greatest blessing that I've ever had in life, the greatest thing that God has allowed me to enjoy, outside of my own salvation, is my family. At times in ministry as a pastor, the only thing that kept my sanity was being able to talk to my wife and the encouragement that she gave to me. I know that when I was going through my doctorate, the only thing that helped me to finish my dissertation was my wife and her insistent encouragement. Jeremiah's deprived of all that, and that's part of the calling that God places on his life.

Something else we know about the personal life of Jeremiah was that he was assisted in his call by his scribe, Baruch. Later on in the book, Baruch is going to play a significant role. He had a part in the composition of the book of Jeremiah. He's mentioned in chapters 32, 36, 43, and 45. So we'll come to know him a bit better. He’s part of Jeremiah's ministry.

Then, finally, the last thing that we know about Jeremiah is that Jeremiah died as a refugee in Egypt, as best we can tell. His ministry seems to conclude there. One Jewish tradition about the prophet Jeremiah said that he was stoned to death and in light of the confrontational message that Jeremiah preached to the people that are in Egypt at the end of the book, we can imagine that that's a very strong possibility.

Jeremiah goes through incredible hardship, persecution, opposition, and I think it's important for us just to remember that at the very beginning of this book:
God calls a man; God calls an individual. The Lord is going to work through that individual and God still continues to call individuals. With all of our failures, with our unique giftings, we can't compare ourselves to others because God makes us unique. God calls unique individuals, and Jeremiah is one of those.

**Divine Compulsion and Commission**

One of the reasons that I've come to love studying this book is that I've come to deeply respect and admire Jeremiah for the courage that he had to preach God's word and to tell the people what God wanted them to hear, no matter what it cost to him as an individual.

Now as we get into the actual record of Jeremiah's call and the passage there—I won't read the entire text—but there's a couple of things that I think emerge from the call itself. As we read God calling Jeremiah to this commission, we’re reminded of the urgency and the divine compulsion that is on Jeremiah’s life to preach the word of God. The first thing that the Lord is going to say to Jeremiah, in verses 4 and 5 are this, it says, “The word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” One of things we definitely understand about the call of prophets in the Old Testament and even in the New, as God calls the apostles there as well, is that the calling of a prophet is an act of God’s sovereignty. God has determined the role that Jeremiah will have before he’s ever born. The sense that God has his hand on the life of a spokesperson before they’re born actually comes out in Paul’s life as well in Galatians. The Lord has called him from the womb to be an apostle and to fulfill the role that he has given to him. Paul is walking down the road one day and sees a light from heaven that slams him into the ground and God says, “you are going to become my spokesmen, my missionary.” In a sense that is exactly what happens to Jeremiah. This is not by Jeremiah’s design. Jeremiah does not open the book saying, “I became a prophet because I always wanted to be one.” Jeremiah does not take an aptitude test or a spiritual gifts inventory and determine “I think being
a prophet is really what works for me.” God in his sovereignty steps into his life and says, “you’re going to be spokesmen.” This might not have been the plan Jeremiah had for his life. He was from a priestly family, but God has other plans for his life.

I think as we look at the prophets in general we understand that God has the right to interrupt their plans. Ezekiel, also from a priestly family, is called to be a prophet in his 30th year. At the time when Ezekiel thought “I am going to be a priest servant.” He’s in exile in Babylon. He’s no longer at the temple and God calls him instead to be a prophet to the exiles that are in Babylon. Amos, was a wealthy land owner in Judah, and Amos says, “I am not the prophet or I was not a prophet, I was not the son of a prophet; it wasn’t part of the family occupation. But God called me to be a prophet” and God actually calls him to leave his home in Judea and go north to the land of Israel.

God has the right to rearrange the plans of his servants. Moses is tending sheep out in desert and has been doing that for 40 years. It looks like God has put him on the shelf. God intervenes. God appears to Gideon in the middle of the night. “You’re going to be the deliverer of the people of Israel.” Gideon is absolutely surprised by this. The call of God on an individual is an act of sovereignty. As we look at the call of a prophet in the Old Testament it is a calling where an individual does not really have a choice to accept or to reject. God is going to call this person, God is going to accomplish his purposes and they cannot say, “No thank you, God. This is not really convenient for me right now.” “No thanks God, I have other plans for my life.” When God calls, the prophet responds. Jonah is a reminder that a prophet, even if he tries to resist, and tries to get away or tries to run, God is going to chase him down and ultimately accomplish his sovereign purposes. Elijah tries to retire from prophetic ministry. He says, “Lord. It is enough and I am ready to die.” Out of fear for his life, he runs from Jezebel, but as he’s running, God takes him and brings him back to Mt. Sinai, Mt. Horeb and re-commissions him to fulfill his prophetic ministry.
Now as Jeremiah is talking about that in the sense of divine calling on his life, the compulsion, “this is something God has placed on me, there is an urgent message I have to preach. I don’t have a choice about this.” Jeremiah will speak about this divine, compelling urge that he has to preach God’s word and this is what he says in chapter 20, verse 9, “If I say I will not mention him, or speak anymore in his name.” And at times that was what Jeremiah felt like doing because he was experiencing all kinds of opposition and the message he was preaching. Jeremiah says, “If I try to stop, if I am not going to speak in God’s name.” He says, “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.” So there is this divine sense that God has called me to do this. I have a responsibility and urging to preach the gospel. I can’t get away from this calling that God has placed on my life. Paul is going to manifest later on the same sense of divine compulsion, “Woe is me if I don’t preach the gospel.”

In our first video session, we talked about the prophet as God’s watchmen and God has assigned them to stand on the wall and warn the people of the approaching judgment and the enemy that’s coming. As God explains to Ezekiel what it means to be a watchmen he says, “if you see the danger that is coming to the people and you warn them of that danger, your responsibility has been fulfilled. And if they don’t listen, then their blood is on their own hands. However, if I have commissioned you as God’s servant, if I have sent you as a watchman, if you do not warn the people of the judgment that is coming, then ultimately their blood is going to be on your own hands.”

So, as we’re looking at this calling in chapter one, there is a divine urgency. This is not something that Jeremiah agrees to because this is what he wants to do, God compels him to do this. It’s a fire in his bones, the word of God, is a fire in his mouth, he can’t get away from that, he can’t escape that.

Call Narratives

One of things that I have found interesting, in studying Jeremiah chapter
one, is to take this passage and to lay it beside other called passages that we see in the Old Testament. I’ve done that with Moses, and with Gideon, with Ezekiel, and with Isaiah. The thing that I’ve found is, as I’ve looked at these passages and I’ve read studies that have done the same thing, is that there are four basic elements that appear in practically all of these Old Testament call passages. Let me summarize what these elements are and then we’ll talk about them in Jeremiah chapter one. The first element is that there is always going to be a vision of God or a voice where God directly communicates to this person. It’s not simply an inner-sense. They see a vision, they see something that represents God or they directly hear the voice of God. Moses sees a burning bush. Ezekiel sees perhaps the most amazing vision of God in a chariot moving through the sky. Isaiah sees the Lord lifted up on his throne. There is always a vision of God or a voice of God.

Number two, there is going to be a commission to a specific task. This is where I am sending you; this is what I am calling you to announce. For the prophets, in most cases, it was announcing God’s judgment. For the prophet, Isaiah, “who will go and speak for us?” Isaiah says, “Lord, here I am, send me.” The Lord sends him and says, “I want you to preach on judgment on the people of Judah until houses, and cities are destroyed and I have reduced the nation to nothing more than a tree stump.”

Now the third thing in all of these prophetic calls that is a common feature is that there is usually an objection of unworthiness. “Lord, I am not the man for the job that you have just given me.” We have already seen from Jeremiah that when Jeremiah is called by God that his reaction is and his response is, “Ah, Lord God, I am but a child and I do not know how to speak.” In Moses’ case, in many ways Jeremiah sounds an awful lot like Moses, who says, “Lord, why did you call me? I am not eloquent of tongue. If at all possible, find someone else.” In Moses’ case the objections continue, “Lord, please, don’t.” Finally, God agrees he will send Aaron with Moses, but there is an objection of unworthiness. Gideon says, “Lord, I am not sure you have the right person. I am from the smallest of the clans
and the tribes of Israel. Why would you call me to be a deliverer?” It takes place in the middle of the night and Gideon wants to fulfill his commission in the middle of the night and he is afraid. Isaiah, when he sees the Lord and hears the voice that is saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” Isaiah is reminded of his own unholiness and he says “Lord again, do you have the right person? I’m not sure that you do. I am a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of the people of unclean lips.” Ezekiel does not give an expression of unworthiness, but when he sees the vision of God, he is unable to speak for several days he is just overwhelmed by the presence.

Now I think at times, there is a misunderstanding of this particular aspect of the call. Often people are going to explain this as that these men did not have faith in God that they needed to believe that God was going to use them. I want to suggest to us that the objection of unworthiness is a good thing. In fact, it is exactly the way that all of us should respond when God calls us into ministry. I cannot imagine anyone in the presence of God, who sees either a vision of God or a voice of God, and they’re given a commission to a specific task, with the response being: “Lord you have made an excellent use of your draft choices. I am just the man to do the job.”

The objection of unworthiness is exactly what God would want to hear. I’ve heard a story of Payton Manning, when he was drafted out of college as a quarterback, the Indianapolis Colts wanted to make sure that they had the right man that they were going to draft the right person to be their leader, so they called him in for an interview. We want to know, what are you like, what’s your personality? Should we draft you as a quarterback? At the end of interview Payton Manning said this “I hope you draft me as you first pick. If you do not draft me I will spend the rest of my career making you wish that you had.” That’s exactly the kind of response that a football team wants to hear about their quarterback. That’s not the way we respond when we’re called by God. We recognize our unworthiness. This carries over to the New Testament as well. Peter says, as Jesus
is calling him to be a fisher of men and he sees a powerful miracle that Jesus does as part of that “Lord, depart from me, I am a sinful man, I don’t deserve to be what you’re calling me to be.” Paul, constantly would dwell on the fact that “I am the chief of sinners.” In one place, reflecting on his own ministry, and talking about the life of being called by God to change peoples’ lives and teach to word of God, and disciple them and evangelize them and be a minister of the gospel. He asks, “who is sufficient for these things?” The answer is, no one is.

But what he comes along to say is our sufficiency comes from God, from the power of his word, from the power of his Spirit, from the power of the new covenant that’s working in the lives of the people that we minister to: that’s where our sufficiency comes from. So I don’t think the objection of unworthiness is a lack of faith. In Moses’ case, where he restates it and he constantly insists to God; that becomes an issue. But the right response to anyone being called to an overwhelming task like what Jeremiah is being called to do the right response is unworthiness.

Going along with that, the Lord is going to meet those objections of unworthiness. The fourth element is that there are going to be promises of God’s protection and enablement. For Jeremiah, that protection and enablement, Jeremiah is going to say “Ah, Lord God, behold I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” God is going to give an enablement in verse 9 that directly answers that. The Lord is going to say to Jeremiah “the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, ‘behold I have put my words in your mouth.’” So if the Lord has put the words in Jeremiah’s mouth, Jeremiah doesn’t have to worry about what to say, because the Lord’s words are going to be the basis of his ministry.

Then in verse 10 the Lord says this to Jeremiah “I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms.” That doesn’t sound like a prophet, it sounds like a king. “I have set you to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” You’re actually going to do these things. Again it’s not
Jeremiah, it’s the power of Jeremiah’s word but that’s God’s enablement, that’s the empowerment. In verse 18, the Lord is going to say this to Jeremiah, in terms of his enablement and empowerment. “Behold” he says “I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against this whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, it priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord to deliver you.” Now if I heard that part of call from God that would have been probably a time to reconsider. But the Lord is telling Jeremiah: “Look, you’re going to encounter great adversity. It’s going to come from the people. It’s going to come from officials. It’s going to come from the kings. It’s going to come from every direction. But I’m going to make you like a fortified city, and ultimately, I am going to deliver you.”

There’s an interesting poetic device in Jeremiah that reminds us of the difficulty that Jeremiah is going to experience in his ministry. In chapter 1 verse 5, the Lord says this to Jeremiah: “before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.” Think about this reference that’s there in verse 5. In Jeremiah chapter 20 verse 18 we have an inclusio the unifies these sections. It says in chapter 20 verse 18 Jeremiah curses the day of his birth and he says “I wish that I had never come out of the womb of my mother.” When you hear the reference the to womb chapter 1 verse 5, you need to go to chapter 20 and here Jeremiah said “I wish the that I have never come out of my mothers womb.” It’s a reminder of how difficult the ministry that Jeremiah is going to experience. It’s how difficult that ministry is that God’s calling him to.

Jeremiahs Commission

Now looking at those 4 elements, there’s the vision of God, there’s the voice of God, there’s the commission, there’s the objection, and then there’s the promises of protection and enablement. I’d like us to go back to that second part. The commission to a specific task, and we’re going to look at this in the beginning of verse 9. “The Lord put out his hand, touched my mouth, the Lord said to me,
‘behold I have put my words in your mouth, and I have set you this day over
nations and kingdoms.” Specific responsibly to a specific calling of Jeremiah not
just to be a prophet to Judah; his ministry is actually going to be one where he is a
prophet to the nations.

Now that doesn’t mean that Jeremiah normally is going to go on preaching
tours to others countries, but it does mean that he has a message to other nations.
Back in verse 5 “I have appointed you as prophet to the nations.” Can you imagine
Jeremiah just thinking about the scope of that. Speaking to my own people is one
thing, speaking to the nations at large, an even greater thing. The Lord also says in
verse 10 “I have set you this day over nations and kingdoms.” Remember these
key words that we talked about in the last section “to pluck up and breakdown, to
destroy and overthrow.” Those four verbs, pluck up, breakdown, destroy, and
overthrow indicates that Jeremiah is a prophet of judgment. Those verbs are going
to appear in various places in the book and as you hear them you should be
reminded this is what God called Jeremiah to do.

God also calls Jeremiah to build and to plant. Ultimately, after he’s
preached this message of judgment, we will also preach a message of salvation.
That is the specific commission, that’s the specific task, that God has given to
Jeremiah. “You’re my prophet. I’m putting my words in your mouth. You’re a
prophet to the nations and a prophet of judgment and salvation.”

Jer 1:10-11: Almond Branch

Now as we go further into chapter one, there are going to be more specifics
that the Lord is giving to Jeremiah. I’d like us to look at verse 11 and 12 and part
of this commission is going to be expressed to Jeremiah in a visionary way. So
here’s what we read in verse 11. “The word of the Lord came to me saying
‘Jeremiah what do you see?’ And Jeremiah said ‘I see an Almond branch.’ Then
the Lord said, ‘you have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform
it.’” And as you were reading over the word you might have said,” well, I’m not
sure I understand the connection. What does an almond branch have to do with the specific commission that God is giving to Jeremiah? What we have is a word play in Hebrew. The word almond branch, *shaqed*, is very closely related to the verb “to watch over” which is the word *shoqed*. So in the Hebrew, Jeremiah says, “I see a *shaqed*,” “I see an almond branch,” and the Lord says, “you have seen well, for I am *shoqed*; watching over my word to perform it.” So the almond branch symbolically represents the judgment of God. I’m calling you to announce that. The almond branch was also one of the first trees to bloom in the spring time and so it announced that the time of God’s judgment was ripe. Prophets had come along for generations preaching about God’s judgment but the blooming of the almond tree signified the time of the end, the time of the harvest is coming near. So that was part of Jeremiah’s commission.

**Jer 1:13-14: Boiling Pot from the North**

There’s another visionary element given to us in verses 13 and 14: “The word of the Lord came to me a second time, and said, ‘what do you see?’ Jeremiah said, ‘I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘Out of the north disaster shall be set loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all of the tribes of the kingdoms of the north,’ declares the Lord, ‘and they shall come, and everyone shall set his throne at the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls around and against all the cities of Judah. And I will declare my judgments against them for all their evil in forsaking me.’”

So the other thing that Jeremiah sees, the other visionary element that’s there, is that he sees a scalding burning pot. The scalding liquid of that pot is pouring out from the north. It’s going to pour down on the land of Judah. That represents, ultimately, the Babylonians but they’re not identified at this point. We simply know them as an enemy from the north. They are referred to in that way in Jer 4:6, 6:22, 10:22, 13:20, and 15:12. So part of the specific commission that God was giving to Jeremiah was not just judgment, but judgment in the specific form of armies that would come. They would dominate and they would subjugate the
people of Judah. That’s what the judgment was going to be like.

Call and Commission of Isaiah

So in many ways the call and the commission of Jeremiah as a prophet reminds me very much of the call and commission of Isaiah that’s given back in chapter 6. The Lord says, “Who will go and who will speak for us?” Isaiah says, “Here I am Lord, send me.” The Lord says, "Here is what I want you to preach Isaiah; make the hearts of this people dull and their ears heavy, their eyes blind, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed." Isaiah, you’re not even going to preach to save them, you’re going to preach to confirm them in judgment.

Again, the Lord wasn’t causing them to act in this way, that’s simply the way they were going to act. The judgment in the words that the prophet preached would make them more accountable. Isaiah goes on and says, “Well, Lord, how long, O Lord?” Sometimes the end of this passage we leave off when we study the passage of Isaiah. Isaiah says “How long, O Lord, how long will I have to preach this kind of message?” And He said, “Until the cities lay waste without inhabitant, and houses are without people, and the land is a desolate waste and the Lord removes the people far away.” Ultimately he tells Isaiah they are going to be left like the stump of a tree and then there’s going to be a remnant purified even out of that little stump.

So, Isaiah was commissioned in many ways a century before Jeremiah to preach the same kind of message. In Isaiah’s time the Lord brought judgment upon the northern kingdom. He came to the point where he almost destroyed the southern kingdom too. The faith of Hezekiah, in a sense, was the thing that delivered them. Jeremiah is being called in effect to finish the job. Isaiah said, “Lord, I’m a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people with unclean lips” the Lord empowered him by sending an angel with a coal from the heavenly fire and purges his lips so that he can speak. Isaiah prefigures Jeremiah in a sense, that Jeremiah says, “Lord, I don’t know how to speak, I am but a youth” and the
Lord touches his mouth, purges his words and makes it possible for him to deliver the message that God has given to them.

Modern Calls

I’d like to think about a practical question that arises out of this whole idea of the calling of a prophet. Often times when I was counseling people, as a pastor, or maybe talking to a young person about their future. When I’m discussing ministry plans with seminary students, or when there are personal conversations after messages, the question arises: how does God call people today? How can I know that I am called to minister? What does that look like? What is that experience like in our lives today? I’d like us to think about that in light of the experience that Jeremiah had. There is a sense and there is a way, that I believe all believers experience a divine call on their lives. Let me explain what I mean by that. I believe that first of all, we come to faith in Christ because there is a call to salvation and regardless of how we understand the way that the will of God and the will of man work in salvation, however we explain that, whether we are Calvinist or Arminian, we understand that God is the one who initiates salvation. Paul in one place in Galatians says, “I have come to know the Lord” but then he corrects himself and says, “I have come to be known by the Lord and those that the Lord chooses he calls them” and we believe that. That’s how we come to faith. I did not become a Christian because I was smart enough to figure out the gospel. I became a Christian because when I was dead in my trespasses and sin, God called me and brought me to himself. So there’s a call to salvation.

I think beyond that, as we begin to live the Christian life, there is a sense of divine calling in vocation on every Christian. You are not a second class Christian if you have a secular job versus a sacred job in full time Christian ministry; God doesn’t look at things in that way. There are many people that are in vocations outside of professional Christian ministry who are just as much, or maybe even more missionaries than those who are. They can glorify God as much in the place that God has called them as in any Christian ministry or Christian vocation. I
believe that God gifts us, enables us, whether you’re a missionary, an evangelist, a pastor, a doctor, a teacher, or whatever God has called you to do, there’s a sense of divine calling and vocation on every Christian. I also believe that in a special way there is still a calling that God places on people’s lives when he is calling them to be his messengers and to be his spokesmen. Whether it’s a pastor, a missionary, a seminary professor, when God calls us to teach and to minister his Word, there is a special calling that goes along with that.

I think that we have to be careful here because what is often communicated when we talk about the call to ministry, is that we may give the idea that the experiences of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Gideon, Ezekiel, or Moses, are going to be exactly like our callings. I believe that there are aspects of this passage that are not normative even for those that are called into things like pastoral ministry. We have to remember that for Jeremiah and Paul they were being called as prophets and apostles to be instruments of divine revelation. So often there was a visionary element, there was a vocal element, where God would literally speak to them and tell them precisely what God wanted them to do. Paul receives a vision at a time in his ministry where the Lord actually directs him where he wants to go in his missionary travels. I don’t believe that God will necessarily speak to us in that way today. God may, God has the right to work in any way that he chooses to, but that is generally not the normative way God calls people into ministry. But I believe that what we do learn from the prophets is that if God is calling us to preach and to teach God’s word, there’s an overwhelming sense of that divine calling on our lives to where we realize that that is what God has called us to do. We really in a sense can’t be happy doing anything else.

You will know, I believe, that if God has called you into a ministry of preaching and teaching his Word that there’s an urgency in that. That you realize that that’s what God wants you to do and there’s nothing else that you can do in life and be happy. There’s an urgency to preach God’s word. Remember Jeremiah says, chapter twenty, verse nine, “There’s a fire in my
bones.” Paul says, “Woe is me, if I preach not the gospel.” I believe that at least in some way when God calls us to Christian ministry there’s that sense of urgency on our lives. I believe that’s one of the things that in some sense needs to be returned to ministry today. I remember one of my seminary professors telling us, he said. “Too many of you are interested in a career, but what you have forgotten about is that you came to seminary because of a calling.” Ministry is not a career, ministry is a calling.

I think as a pastor one of the things that will give you a sense that God has called you to this place and you’re going to be there to minister through thick and thin is the realization that God has put you there. When we have statistics that say that the average ministerial stay in a church is two years or three years it’s a sense that in many ways too many of us are interested in a career rather than a calling. If Jeremiah had looked at prophetic ministry as a career rather than a calling I’m not sure that he would’ve been able to endure. It was not financially lucrative for him. That sense that God has called you to do this and there’s nothing else in life. This is what you are here for.

There’s nothing greater that the joy of being able to fulfill that calling. I sometimes tell my students about the privilege of ministry. I would rather teach God’s Word than be the president of the United States, because I believe there’s just a joy and a blessing when this is what God has called you to do. This is what gives you joy and meaning in life.

As you get older you begin to realize, “I may have a limited time left in my life, I want to make use of every advantage, every opportunity to preach, to teach, to impact people with God’s word because I believe this is my calling in life.” But to wrap all of this up and to try to help us to understand this, recognizing the uniqueness of how God called Jeremiah or how God commissioned Paul, may, in some ways, take away sometimes the superstitious ideas that we’ve attached to it that I need to hear a voice from God or I need to see a vision from God. Finally, perhaps it can help all of us, whether we’re called to Christian ministry or not, to
have a better understanding of the idea. What does it mean to find the will of God? Or how do I discover the will of God for my life?

I’ve read a couple of books that have helped me with that. One of them, a number of years ago, was Garry Friesen’s book, *Decision Making in the Will of God*, and then Bruce Waltke in a tiny book with a more direct title, *Finding the Will of God: Question of Pagan Notion*. Sometimes we’re reduced this to sort of a magical process and Dr. Frieson talks about many people believe that the will of God is like a dot in the center of a circle. What God wants me to do is spend the rest of my life finding that dot in the center of the circle. What that means is I have to be married to the one person in the world that God that has created for me, doing the one job in the one place that God has called me to be and if I mess up any part of that plan there’s the chance that I’m going to be outside of the will of God. The problem with that is that I’m not sure that God reveals those kinds of things.

As I’ve done ministry, I’ve been a pastor in Kansas and Virginia. I never saw a burning map in the sky that said, “You need to go to Virginia or to Kansas.” When God called me to go to the seminary that I’m teaching at now, there was not a voice from heaven that said, “Virginia is the place where you need to be.” God doesn’t necessarily reveal those kinds of details to us, and if we spend our lives trying to find the dot in the center of the circle, in many ways that can end up becoming a very frustrating process.

I think a better way to understand the will of God is more that the will of God is like a box and there are things that God has clearly revealed to us in his word that are inside of that box. There are moral commandments and instructions that God has given me about my marriage. God commands me to be faithful to my wife, living inside the box means being faithful to that. Living outside the box would mean being unfaithful to that marriage. Inside the box, God tells us, it is the will of God that we be thankful for all of the things that come into our lives and that we pray at all times and in all circumstances. That’s living inside the box. If
I’m not praying, if I’m not thankful, then I’m outside the box. What God is asking us to do is not to find the will of God, the will of God has been laid out for us and revealed to us in his word. Our job is to live within the will of God that he’s revealed in Scripture. Live inside the box. Then, as we do that, inside the box, there are going to be all kinds of opportunities, decisions, choices that we can make as we prayerfully seek God’s direction, as we ask God to lead us, to guide us, as we talk to Christians that have other experiences that they can share with us of what God has taught them in life, we begin to discover the plan that God has for our lives. But I’m not looking for a dot in the center of the circle, I’m living within that box, and prayerfully and wisely making the decisions that God allows me to make as I live within his will.

As we do that, I understand, I don’t always make the right decisions, I don’t always make the right choices. Ultimately God in his providence has, even in my life, used the bad decisions I’ve made or maybe the decision that wasn’t the perfect career opportunity, God has blessed them all and used them in ways that I could never imagine.

I believe the way that typically the call will come into your life as you serve the Lord is that as you’re faithful to him and as you’re obedient and you’re doing the things that God has called you to do, the Lord will create opportunities. The Lord will impress upon you a desire to teach his Word, and that will become a passion for you in the same way that was for Jeremiah when he says, “God’s Word was like a fire in my bones, I had to speak it.” And even if God does not lead you into professional Christian ministry, God will begin to take your personality, your gifts, and your abilities and shape your vocational choices. I believe that God has an absolute plan for our lives. I believe that God knew before the foundation of the world that I was going to marry the woman that I married. I believe that God had that one woman planned for me. But I believe that if I’m faithful and obedient to God as I am seeking a partner, God may lead me away from anyone different. My goal is not to find that one person, but to trust that God
will help me to do so. As we look at God’s call on Jeremiah’s life, I believe that God may not speak to us in the same way that he spoke to Jeremiah. But God will lead us and direct us when help us and we make these kinds of choices and decisions.

There are a lot of magical ideas about finding the will of God. Some people take the story of Gideon and Gideon putting out the fleece. If the fleece is wet and the ground is dry or if the ground is dry and the fleece is wet and they will pray for God to do things like that. But rather than looking for God to necessarily speak to us in direct ways or to give us a vision, or to confirm things with some sort of special circumstances, our role is to be obedient to God and then to trust that God will direct and lead our lives as we’re faithful and obedient to him, the same way that he did with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 1 as Programmatic for the Whole Book

I want to mention just a couple of other things about chapter one in Jeremiah. It’s not only a call passage, but I believe that Jeremiah chapter one is in a sense, a programmatic introduction to the book of Jeremiah as a whole. Now I want you to imagine we have the book of Jeremiah in book form and it’s a tiny portion of our Bible. But imagine a large scroll with fifty-two chapters on it. It’s large, it’s unwielding. You can’t look at chapter one and say, “Oh, I’m going to quickly unroll this and look over it some in chapter thirty-seven.” I believe that one of the things that the prophets, especially the larger prophets, intentionally do is that at the very beginning of the book, they will give us what we could call a “programmatic introduction.” The major themes that are going to be in the book of Jeremiah are going to be revealed to us and enveloped in the first chapter and then unfolded as we look at the rest of the book. Particularly, in Jeremiah, there are themes in chapter one that are going to be developed in the rest of the book.

We are going to be reminded throughout the book that Jeremiah is a prophet to the nations in Jeremiah 25 and Jeremiah 26-41. We are going to be reminded that Jeremiah is going to be a prophet of building up and tearing down.
First there’s going to be judgment and there’s going to salvation. God is going to say in Jeremiah chapter one, “I have put my words in your mouth.” In a sense in the rest of the book, Jeremiah himself becomes the living word of God. It’s not just his words, it’s actually his actions as well. Jeremiah chapter one says that there is going to be an ‘enemy from the north’ and the rest of the book is going to unfold for us that the “enemy from the north” is going to be the Babylonians. God says to Jeremiah, “You’re going to experience opposition from the people, the officials, even the kings themselves. There’s going to be opposition and hardship.” We’re going to see that in the stories where people resist Jeremiah’s message, where they do not listen, and where they’re actually going to put him in prison and inflict all kinds of persecution on him.

Then, finally, in the same way that we have seen, there’s a parallel between Jeremiah and Moses in that both of them say, “Lord, I don’t know how to speak.” We’re going to see that throughout the book of Jeremiah one of the things we’re going to develop as we study the book is that Jeremiah becomes a prophet like Moses. Jeremiah’s experiences in many ways are going to parallel that of Moses. Then as we work through that we’re going to see ultimately are ways that Jeremiah’s ministry goes beyond that of Moses. But all of the themes that the book of Jeremiah as a whole is going to unfold are basically laid out for us in this first chapter. We have the call of the prophet, and we have a programmatic introduction to the message of the book as a whole.
Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Session 8

© 2013, Dr. Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt

Jeremiah 2-3: The Marriage Metaphor--God and Israel

This is Dr. Gary Yates and his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number 8. Jeremiah two and three. “The Marriage Metaphor: God and Israel.”

Review

Our focus in the lesson today is Jeremiah chapter two, and we are going to be looking at the topic of Jeremiah’s indictment of God’s unfaithful wife. In our lesson in chapter one last time, we saw that the passage there is not just the call of Jeremiah in the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry. In many ways, it is a programmatic introduction to the book as a whole. We have Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations. He is a messenger of judgment and salvation. He is tearing down and building up. He becomes a living expression of God’s word. God has put his words into his mouth. There is an enemy from the north, that theme of the Babylonians and what God is doing through them. The Lord is going to make Jeremiah like bronze walls of a fortified city because there is going to be conflict throughout his ministry, and Jeremiah is presented in that opening chapter as a prophet like Moses. Moses says, “Lord, send someone else. I don’t know how to speak.” Jeremiah says, “Ah, Lord God, you are calling me to be a prophet. I am but a child, I don’t know how to speak.” So the themes that are going to work themselves through the book of Jeremiah are found in chapter one.

In a sense, Jeremiah chapter two, verse one through four gives us the first unit of Jeremiah’s actual messages, and in many ways they are going to introduce themes that again, work themselves through the entire book. Jeremiah chapter two is going to look at the fragmenting of God’s relationship with Israel. That relationship is like a marriage. The covenant is like a marriage but in this case that relationship is broken. The remainder of the book of Jeremiah, particularly the
message of hope that is in chapter 30-33 is going to express for us how that relationship is going to be restored.

It’s hard for us at times to read the book of Jeremiah. Again it’s different from the kind of books we’re used to reading. It’s not like the ones that we have in our Kindles, or even reading the New Testament, the apostles of Paul or the Gospels. It’s difficult, but I believe, in a sense, that if we understand the book of Jeremiah as a story that goes along with all these messages.

There are two things that are working themselves out in the story. Number one, as Andrew Shead reminds us, the book of Jeremiah is the story of the word of God. It’s the story of the word of God. How it looks, how it’s presented, and how it’s responded to in the life and times of Jeremiah. It’s the story of what the word of God accomplishes. The word of God is powerful and the word of God brings down the nation of Judea because of their disobedience. But the word of the lord also gives hope to them for the future. So that’s part of the plot. What happens to the word God? What is it like? What does it look like? And what does it accomplish?

Introduction

But another theme of Jeremiah where we can imagine almost a plot unfolding throughout the book is that the book of Jeremiah is about Judea as God’s unfaithful wife and ultimately, how the Lord is going to restore that broken relationship. Now as we begin looking at chapter two and chapter three in Jeremiah, this passage has many of the prose and has the poetry of the Old Testament in general. This is true as there are a number of very powerful metaphors and word images. The prophets do not want to just feed us information. The prophets want us to feel the message that they are conveying to us. They want us to capture the emotion. One of the things I love about Jeremiah is the passion of his preaching, but we don’t simply get the information that the Babylonians are coming and they are going to be here in 586 BC. We get the impression that the Babylonians are coming and they are going to become an ancient nation that you
can’t even identify and they are going to wipe you out. They are going to be like locusts that consume your land. They are going to be like lions, wolves, and leopards; and all these images come crashing down on us.

In chapter two, we have a number of figures of speech and a number of images where Jerimiah is really doing the job as God’s prosecuting attorney of announcing God’s indictment against them. Here is the accusation. Here are the sins that you have committed.

**Key Metaphors of Jeremiah 2**

I just want to go through and point out some of the key metaphors that stand out to me as I read this chapter, but then there is one central metaphor that I think ties all these together. In chapter two, verse three, the Lord is going to say that that Israel as a people was like the first fruits of the harvest. It says in verse three, “Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of the harvest, all who aid it incurred guilt, disaster came upon them, declares the Lord.” In the Old Testament law, the first fruits of the harvest belong to the Lord; that was God’s portion. The Lord says of Israel, “they are my portion. They are my chosen selected people.” As a result of that, if anyone tried to harm them or eat them or consume them, then the Lord would destroy them for doing that. They were touching God’s portion. What is going to work out in the rest of the book is the fact that the Lord has allowed these nations to come in and ravage Israel because they have defiled their position as God’s chosen people. So that is an image, a very powerful one, at the beginning. Chapter two, verse three, “they are the first fruits of the harvest.”

In chapter two, verse fourteen, the image that is given there is that Israel has become a slave and there is a rhetorical question in chapter 2 verse 14: “Is Israel a slave? Is he a home born servant? Why then has he become prey to these other nations?” So the image there is that Israel has become a slave, they have become in bondage to these other nations, that is not the position that God had designed for them in the first place. The Lord had rescued them out of bondage so the sad thing was by their idolatry, Israel was putting themselves back in bondage.
Chapter 2 verse 21, the Lord compares Israel to a choice vine. “I planted you in the promise land.” The Lord is saying, “like a choice vine, holy of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine.” So the Lord initially planted his people in the land. He wanted them to be fruitful; he wanted them to bear fruit in their lives. Instead, they have become a wild vine like poison oak or poison ivy, and they’re useless. They’re weeds that should be cut down, and that image of Israel as a vine is used other places in the Old Testament. In Psalms 80, the Lord pictures Israel as a vine that he planted in the land but that again becomes unfaithful to him. Isaiah chapter five, Isaiah presents Israel as a vineyard and the prophet says that the Lord wanted good grapes, but instead they’ve produced wild and sour grapes. In the sense that’s the same image here. The Lord planted Israel and did everything that he could to make sure that they would become a productive vine, but instead they have become a wild and corrupt vine.

Chapter 2:22 and 2:34 is going to picture Judea as a criminal who is covered with blood stains. So we read in Jeremiah 2:22, “though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me declares the Lord God.” Verse 34, “also on your skirts is found the life blood of the guiltless poor. You did not find him breaking in, yet in spite of these things you say, ‘I am innocent.’” And so they are pictured as having bloodstains and the investigators without even having to turn on the purple light that shows the presence of blood, you can see the blood all over Israel. It reminds us of what the prophet Isaiah says in Isaiah 1:10-15, the people of Judea are lifting up their hands to God and they’re petitioning him and praying to him, but as they are praying to God, the Lord looks down and sees the stains of blood. Now Jeremiah’s audience might have protested we are not murderers. We are not criminals in that sense, but by the way they had treated the poor, the way that they had oppressed them and the way they had deprived them of their livelihood, in a sense, in God’s eyes, all of them whether they were violent criminals or not, they were covered with the
guilt of their sin. That is a very powerful image.

Chapter 2 verse 23, describes Israel’s tendency to wander away from God. It says, “How can you say I am not unclean? I have not gone after the Baals? Look at your way in the valley and know what you have done. You are a restless, young camel, running here and there.” So the Lord charges them with idolatry. “They say we have not gone after the Baals. We haven’t pursued these other gods.” The Lord says, “Look at yourselves. You are like a restless, young camel, just an animal going back and forth. You lack sense. What you have done has reduced you basically to nothing more than a beast. That’s what you are.”

Now the image gets a little more offensive in verse 24. There is another metaphor here. He says, “You are a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust?” You are like a donkey in heat. And in the same way that a donkey in heat sniffs the urine trail looking for his mate you’re like a wild animal in heat chasing after these gods. Their idolatry had reduced them to that level. The Lord wanted them to see that. And so Jeremiah uses this powerful image of what that’s like.

Chapter 2 verse 26, “They are like a thief that has been caught in the act.” Chapter 2 verse 26, “As a thief is shamed when caught so the house of Israel shall be shamed.” They were caught in the very act of robbing and thieving and yet throughout this chapter and one of the things we’re going to see the people say is, “We’re innocent; we haven’t defiled ourselves with these other gods the way that you’ve claimed.”

So these metaphors, these images, they collide on us and they crash down on us in many ways, trying to help us to see the guilt of Israel. J Andrew Dearman, as he describes the section, says this is likely an anthology of Jeremiah’s messages; things that he’s preached over the long course of his ministry. They are setting the stage for what we see in the rest of the book as Jeremiah is going to charge them with covenant infidelity. But the prophet doesn’t just convey information; he wants the people to see the depravity of their sin. The Lord looks
at them like an animal in heat. The Lord pictures them as a slave; they have enslaved themselves. The Lord views them as a corrupt vine that is not producing the fruit that it should. The Lord views them as criminals who have bloodstains on their hands; who have been caught in the act. All of these images are there to convince the people of their sin.

**Judah as an Unfaithful Wife Metaphor**

But the unifying metaphor and the unifying image that works itself out I believe in chapter 2 verse 1 on into chapter 3 is that Judah is an unfaithful wife and by their failure in their covenant to the Lord, in their failure to be obedient to him-- more importantly in the issue of loyalty; in their failure to worship him exclusively and serve him exclusively, they have become like an unfaithful wife who has prostituted herself and has committed adultery.

So we have this idea that appears throughout the Old Testament that idolatry is not just a sin, idolatry is a form of spiritual adultery where the people of Israel have been unfaithful to God as their husband. Now there are a number of places in chapter 2 and 3 where we see specific references to this marriage relationship. Back in chapter 2 at the very beginning of this message the prophet is going to say, “Thus says the Lord, ‘I remember the devotion of your youth and how you loved me as a bride and how you followed me in the wilderness in a land not sown.’”

So let’s think about the marriage relationship between God and Israel when the Lord brought them out of Egypt and when he was taking them through the wilderness. The prophet says that was like the honeymoon time in the marriage. You followed the Lord, you were obedient to him and we begin to think about other parts of the Old Testament and our response to that might be: Are you kidding? Remember what life in the wilderness between God and Israel. They are worshipping the golden calf in Exodus 32 before the details on the covenant between God and Israel had even been brought down from the mountain. They confirm and they state to the Lord that they will live under that covenant in
Exodus 20 to 24 but they are basically cheating on God before the honeymoon is even over. This passage says, well actually though when you compare it to the present the way that Israel responded to God in the wilderness that was like the honeymoon. That might reflect something of how unfaithful they have become during the time of Jeremiah’s ministry. They were a stiff-necked, hard-hearted, rebellious people. They constantly disobeyed the Lord. They end up wandering through the wilderness for forty years because of their disobedience.

Yet the Lord says, “I remember the devotion of your youth.” Now the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 20 of his book is going to give us a more realistic assessment of Israel’s history and he’s going to say basically, “You have worshipped idols throughout your entire lifetime. You were worshipping idols in Egypt; you continue to worship idols in the wilderness” and basically that’s their history. But in Jeremiah 2 as part of the picture, “I remember at one time you loved me the way that a bride loved her husband.” I always imagine the story of the husband and the wife and the wife who always sat beside her husband in the car and now they’ve become distant and apart but the husband reminds her, “Look, I’m not the one who’s moved, you have.” In a sense that’s what the Lord is saying to Israel.

**God as Israel’s Bride**

Now there are other passages, other verses that are going to directly use this metaphor of God and Israel as a bride. The primary thing that these verses are going to say is that Israel has become a prostitute--they have been unfaithful, they have committed adultery. It may not necessarily convey that they have sold themselves for sex but it is conveying the idea of spiritual unfaithfulness to God. Verse 20: “Yet on every hill and under every green tree you have bowed down like a whore.” Verse 33 says this, taking the imagery a little bit further. “How well you direct your course to seek love so that even to wicked women you have taught your ways.” Alright, you’re not just a prostitute, you aren’t just unfaithful to the Lord, you could actually give classes on this because you’re really good at it.
Chapter 3 verse 1, “You have played the whore with many lovers and would you then return to me? Declares the Lord.” Israel was not just guilty of infidelity. They were guilty of serial infidelity.

Chapter 3 verses 6-10: Israel and Judah are unfaithful sisters. The Lord has already written a certificate of divorce for Israel and, in a sense, because Judah has not learned the lesson of what God did with Israel, Judah is worse than the apostate Northern Kingdom. Chapter 3 verses 19-21 Judah has become unfaithful sons and unfaithful wives. Both are images of the closest possible family relationships, the relationship of a husband and a wife and the relationship of a father and his children. It’s strange to us at times the way the Old Testament is going to join those things together but its emphasizing the Lord has the closest possible relationship to his people and they have not been faithful to that relationship.

**Israel as an Unfaithful Wife in the other Prophets**

Now as we look at the Old Testament prophets this idea of Israel, as an unfaithful wife is not just something that we find in the book of Jeremiah it is also part of the message of two other Old Testament prophets in a very prominent way. It’s very prominent in the story and the message and the preaching of the prophet Hosea. Hosea’s own life represents and pictures the history of Israel with God. He marries an unfaithful wife named Gomer. Whether she is unfaithful to him before the marriage or after the marriage is something that scholars dispute but ultimately that relationship is fractured. The children that are born to that marriage reflect the severing of the relationship with God. The names that are given to the children are, “not my people,” “I will not have compassion on them.” But Hosea ultimately loves his wife, takes her back and restores the relationship. That’s the story of Israel and God.

Ezekiel chapter 16 and Ezekiel chapter 23 are also going to use very powerful images of Jerusalem and Judah and Israel as God’s bride and then ultimately how they have been promiscuous and unfaithful against him, again, in a
spiritual way by their worship of idols. Sometimes the shocking metaphors and language that Jeremiah uses, you’re like an animal in heat; or chapter 2 verse 33, “Even the worst of women could learn from your ways.” The prophet Ezekiel uses imagery that is just as graphic and just as vivid. He says to the people that were living exile; the people of Israel originally, they were like a baby that had been abandoned in a field. The umbilical cord had not been cut. The baby was covered in its blood from its birth. It was abandoned by its parents and God found this baby girl and loved her and raised her and lavished every possible gift that he could upon her. Then he took her as his bride. And then after all of the things that he had lavished upon her, after all the ways that in his splendor he had made her beautiful, this woman turned against him and used her beauty and used all of the things that the husband had given to her, the Lord had given to Israel, to become unfaithful. She became promiscuous in every way, at every street corner, every high place she advertised herself.

Ezekiel says, “The difference between my people and a prostitute is that a prostitute gets paid for her services, my people have actually paid the lovers that they have pursued.” In the normal course of business there are those who seek out a prostitute. Israel as a prostitute sought out her lovers. The prophet Ezekiel is even going to compare Israel or Samaria and Jerusalem to Sodom as three sisters that were promiscuous and unfaithful. He’s going to say Judah is worse, Jerusalem is worse than any of her sisters.

**Facets of the Marriage Metaphor**

So, this same kind of graphic imagery that appears in Jeremiah is the heart of the story of Hosea. It’s part of the preaching of Ezekiel and so in chapter two I think it’s very important for us to understand: what exactly is the purpose of the marriage metaphor in the book of Jeremiah? What does it convey and what can we learn from this image? This is the foundational message in the book of Jeremiah. This is the first thing that we're going to read that the prophet says. So here are some things that I think the marriage metaphor conveys. Number 1 the marriage
metaphor stresses the depth of God’s love for Israel. Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 2 “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” This is one of my favorite verses in the book of Jeremiah. We see the depth of that everlasting love in the fact that God uses the closest possible human relationship: marriage itself, the relationship between a man and a women to talk about his love for the people of Israel. In the New Testament how does God picture his love for us? Christ as our husband and as our groom, gave himself up for his bride and the command given to us in Ephesians chapter 5: “Husbands love your wives even as Christ loved the church.” The marriage metaphor in Scripture between God and his people expresses the depth and degree of God’s love for us.

Whenever I do a marriage ceremony, one of the passages that I like to read as part of the ceremony is found in Song of Solomon chapter 8, verse 7. I think we realize Song of Solomon has a few things to say about love and marriage and the beauty of all that, but there is an expression about marital love in Song of Solomon chapter 8 verse 7 it says this, “many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it out. If a man offered for love all of the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised for it.” I tell couples as I’m marrying them. “I pray that you will know in your home and your life that kind of love, that it’s more valuable to you than any wealth or any possessions. Nothing could ever extinguish this kind of love. That’s what real marital love is about.” I pray that as a couple they will experience that, but if that’s what marital love is like and the Bible is using the metaphor of God being married to his people or Christ, we’re his bride and he died on the cross so that he could wash us, cleanse us, and purify us. It’s speaking in a very powerful way of the depth of God’s love.

The second thing that it reminds us of is that the marriage metaphor in the covenant in Israel reminds us of the exclusivity of the covenant relationship. God is expecting Israel to be absolutely, exclusively devoted to him. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4 and 5 what’s the convent standard that the Lord puts in front of the people of Israel, “you are to love the Lord with all of your heart, all of your
mind, and all of your strength.” Every fiber of your being is to be devoted exclusively to God. That does not allow for the possibility of something else or someone else coming into that relationship. Deuteronomy chapter 13, “You are to have no other gods before me.” There is nothing that is to compete with God as a rival. And so the whole marriage metaphor is stressing the exclusivity of the relationship.

Sometimes I ask my students to think about this, “Would you ever think about taking your best friend on a honeymoon?” That’s generally not accepted because that’s a time when you’re exclusively devoted/given to your husband given to your bride and enjoying that new relationship that you’ve entered into. The relationship that God had with Israel, they were to be exclusively devoted to him. What we see constantly happening in the Old Testament, the Israelites by worshipping idols are typically not throwing away their relationship to the Lord, in a syncretistic way they are trying to bring these other gods in. “Hey, let’s make sure that we’re covered with all of our bases.” God is saying that he wants his people to be exclusively devoted to him.

Now even though polygamy was a reality in the Old Testament, it was something in that culture that God tolerates and puts up with and regulates in the Mosaic Law. We remember that going back to Genesis chapter 2. God’s original design for marriage is that one man and one woman would be joined together as one flesh and that relationship would exist for their entire life. That’s God’s design for marriage at the human level and at the spiritual level God’s design is that there is nothing else in life that should ever take the place of the Lord. There is nothing in our lives in terms of either something that we give ourselves to or that we trust in or that we love or that we serve that would ever compete or provide a rival to him. The sin of idolatry of all of the covenant disobedience that Israel could offer to God, the sin of idolatry, was the most severe because it was a sin of violating loyalty and of disloyalty that gave rise to these other sins. So number one the marriage metaphor stresses the depth of God’s love. Number two the exclusivity
Number three in the context of the ancient Near East the marriage metaphor conveys the dependence of Israel on the Lord as their husband. Now marriage in our culture versus what it was like in the days of the Old Testament is quite different. Now there is egalitarian type of relationship that we enter into as husband and wife. But in the culture of the ancient Near East the wife in almost every way was dependent on the husband. He was her livelihood; he was her life. In the culture in the Old Testament at large the husband had rights and privileges in that marriage that were not necessarily true of the wife. Now that particular aspect of marriage is not necessarily being endorsed by the Bible but as the prophets used this metaphor of God as the husband of Israel it’s a reminder in that particular culture there is an unequal relationship in some sense. Israel is dependent on God and they need him in the same way that a wife would need her husband in the context of the ancient Near East.

Number four the marriage metaphor is going to stress for us the seriousness and the shamefulness of Israel’s sin. That’s part of this graphic imagery. Why would the prophet charge them with being like an animal in heat? Why would the prophet say these shocking things, “you have spread your legs under every tree or at every high place in the city.” I can imagine that if we walked into a church as a pastor and made these kind of statements in church today it might not be received really well. So what were they trying to do? They were trying to help these people understand the severity of their sin. They have violated this special sacred relationship and the amazing thing is that instead of God only feeling anger about that, which obviously he does, the Lord also feels the grief of a husband who has been betrayed by his partner. I know as a pastor the most painful moments that I’ve ever spent with people are the times when someone in a marriage relationship whether its husband or a wife, when they’ve broken that trust whatever the circumstances or however they love each other or want to restore that relationship. There is pain in that kind of thing that no other experience in life is like. So the
idea of Israel as a prostitute conveys that sin isn’t just breaking God’s law, in a sense, sin is breaking God’s heart. The Lord feels this pain and this grief over what his wife has done to him, what his partner has done to him. Hosea chapter 2 verses 5-7 and I read this, God in Israel but I think about as a husband how I feel as I read this passage.

Hosea says that Israel received the good gifts that the Lord had given to them: the land, the wine, the grain, all of those blessings and what they ended up doing was they attributed those gifts not to God but to Baal. And they gave their love and their devotion to Baal and said, look at how Baal, as our husband, has blessed us. Now as a husband, that’s like if I take my wife out for dinner and buy her roses and she invites our next door neighbor over for dinner to thank him for that. That’s exactly what the people of Israel had done to the Lord. I think that every husband who was in that audience and heard that message would feel the pain that the Lord felt. In a culture of honor and shame, the women would have felt the shame that would have been attributed to the label of prostitute. That was not just something that God was saying about the women in that culture that was something that all of the people had to place themselves in that position. As every husband, and remember they’re primarily the ones that the prophet is speaking too because they are the ones who will make the decisions that decide the direction of the nation. Every husband in that society needs to not just put themselves in place of God, but to put themselves in place of the wanton woman that has been unfaithful to the Lord. This would be a painful thing.

I think the idea of adultery, prostitution, and promiscuity was also a very effective image and picture for the sins of Israel because their idolatry is that they worship the Canaanite gods that often involve fertility rights that involved sexual immorality and promiscuity. There were practices that God had never designed to be part of the worship of Israel. Things in fact that that as God was setting up the tabernacle and the temple that God took steps to make sure would not occur as part of their worship. The sexual fertility rights, this perversion that had come into
play and so the use of the image of prostitution very effectively signifies literally what Judah was doing on every green hill on these high places as they worshiped these pagan gods as they were committing sexual immorality.

A fifth thing that the marriage metaphor conveys to us is that it reminds us of the severity of the judgment that the Lord is going to bring as a result to this sin. God is angered in the book of Jeremiah by the sin of his people. In chapter 23 verse 20: “the wrath of God will not abate until it accomplishes everything that it desires.” Jeremiah 13:22 “the fierce anger of the Lord is going to break out against the people” and Jeremiah says, “I’m filled with the wrath and indignation of God because God is angered over the sin of his people.” His response is justifiable when we understand the severity of the sin. God’s reaction, God’s broken heart, God’s anger and then the specific ways that he is going to judge the people is absolutely justified in light of what they have done and the sin that they have committed. Every husband who heard this message would have understand that.

In the Old Testament law and in ancient Near Eastern law, adultery was often a capital crime. It could be punished by those that were found guilty of this being put to death. It was a capital offence. On the other hand, there were times when the husband might actually punish the wife with some form of physical punishment.

This metaphor and image of Israel as an unfaithful wife and God as an angry husband who has been betrayed and God responding in anger as a result of that is not just at the beginning of the book it’s going to work itself through the entire book. We turn over to chapter 13. We look at verses 24-27 and this is one of the most disturbing passages in all the book of Jeremiah. To be honest in our culture and in our context it’s even kind of uncomfortable to even read these verses but here’s what the Lord says. Verse 24 “I will scatter you like chaff, driven by the wind from the desert. This is your lot, the portion that I have measured out to you, declares the Lord, because you have forgotten me and trusted in lies”.

Remember the Lord is a betrayed husband in this case and he says in verse 26: “I myself will lift up your skirts over your face and your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adultery and neighings, your lewd whorings, on the hills and fields. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean?” So in the culture of the ancient Near East, God is punishing their adultery in a very appropriate way. He is taking them to a public place, he is stripping his wife naked and he is exposing her so that all can see her shame. Again to be honest as I read this, in our culture and our context, it’s painful to read this. As a pastor and even here teaching this session, I have to be sensitive to how we reflect that in light of the problem of spousal abuse that we have in our culture. As feminist critics have read this part of the Bible they have often been deeply troubled by it and again understandably so.

**Strong Imagery**

There are studies that focus specifically on passages like Jeremiah 2, Jeremiah 13, Ezekiel 16, Ezekiel 23, the book of Nahum where the city of Nineveh is described as a woman that the Lord is going to strip naked and punish. They have referred to the imagery that’s there as porno-prophetic language. There have been studies that have labeled God as a divine rapist. He is a sexual predator. He is an abusive husband. And in light of the ongoing as I’ve said the problem of abuse of women and how that’s an issue in our society, again, I think we have to be careful how we teach this and how we express this idea about God from the Old Testament. We have to remember that the prophets are speaking in an ancient Near Eastern culture in an ancient Near Eastern context. There are aspects of the Bible that are time conditioned. Again this doesn’t just drop out of heaven. It is reflective of the culture of that day where the punishment of women in a physical way, even capital punishment at times was carried out. So we understand that, but at the same time I also want us to understand that we are dealing with metaphorical language and I think sometimes in the responses and reactions of feminist critics to these passages, I think sometimes they minimize that idea. The
imagery is definitely troubling to us, but I don’t believe it’s our job here to redeem
the Bible. I believe our job here to listen to what that metaphor has to say.

In this context of portraying God as a husband who is going to punish his
wife, we are reminded of the purpose why Jeremiah is expressing this in the first
place. God is telling the people these things so that they repent and change their
ways. Yes, the Bible uses some very graphic, horrible, violent imagery to express
that but ultimately God’s purpose was not to carry out this kind punishment. The
purpose of this language was hopefully to turn Judah from their sins so that they
would be spared from it. In a real sense I think that the prophets are simply being
realistic as well as they use this imagery related to the treatment of women. In war,
as the Babylonians are going to invade the land, women would be the ones who
would be deprived of their children. They would be the ones who would lose their
husbands. They would be the ones that would be raped and physically abused.
They would be the ones often taken away as captive prisoners to marry their
enemies. So as the prophet is using this graphic imagery, these metaphors are
designed to say: “This is what judgment is going to look like.” The Lord doesn’t
revel in this. The Lord doesn’t take joy in this. The Lord is using this powerful
imagery to get the people to respond, to turn from their sins, to make the judgment
seem as awful as it could possibly be so that ultimately they might respond to the
warnings.

So I believe we need to understand the metaphorical nature, we need to take
into consideration the rhetorical reasons that this is being used. We need to
balance that with the fact that as we look at the other parts of the Old Testament
we are reminded that God has a special concern for the oppressed and the needy
especially when that comes to the idea of women who are oppressed or abused or
not taken care of, God responds to those situations. Genesis chapter 21 is just a
beautiful passage; just touching in the compassion that’s showed there. The Lord
hears the cry of Hagar when Abraham and Sarah have driven her away, and he’s
aware of Hagar and her son Ishmael. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 18 we are
reminded that the Lord executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and throughout the ancient Near East that was an ideal. A just king takes care of the poor and the needy and if the Lord is a just king he is going to do that. Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 15-18 reminds us that in the normal practice of war, Israel was not to commit violent acts against non-combatants and that would include women.

Then finally in Deuteronomy 21 verses 14-18 what someone has referred to as what Israel is to do when they take prisoners of war, Israel was reminded that women taken as captives in war, even they were to be treated with dignity and to be given time to allow them to warm up to their husbands and those kinds of things. So, the metaphors that we see in the book of Jeremiah are never designed to validate, to justify, to excuse, or to rationalize a husband ever abusing his wife or mistreating her in any kind of physical way. We are reminded as well, that as God is judging people in the context of warfare, that God may use these enemies to carry out his judgment, but at the human level these judgments are never going to be completely just.

**Divine Wrath**

There’s an ultimate justice that God will ultimately have to meet out, and God is using very unjust situations, and the metaphor of these women who are going to be abused, hurt, and injured, and all the things that are going to happen to them conveys the reality and the horrors of that judgment. Divine wrath is a difficult thing. So in our culture, this is a difficult part of the book of Jeremiah to deal with and I felt like it’s important that we address that, but beyond this, I think there is a more pressing issue in our culture that we need to think about as we look at this. I think part of our resistance is not just to the idea of spousal abuse of a wife, but I think one of the reasons why these images bother us is that overall we are resistant to the idea of a holy God who hates sin. The fact that our sin, our disobedience, our infidelity, and our idolatry, and remember Calvin said our hearts are idol factories, all of us are idol worshipers and that brings us under God’s
wrath and God's judgment.

I was reading a very popular Christian blog this week and the comments on the blog were discussing the abusiveness of any kind of idea or how degrading it was for theologians to say that we are not deserving of God’s love, but the Bible is going to remind us that we are not deserving of God’s love that God commended his love toward us, not because of what we deserve, but because of his mercy and his grace. When we understand the wrath of a holy God, and the fact that God in his anger would allow these things to happen, he would use the Babylonians to bring this kind of degradation to the people of Israel, when we understand the intensity of divine wrath then we can begin to understand the greatness of God’s love, God’s mercy, and God’s compassion. We don’t make God a greater God of love by taking away his wrath and his anger; in a sense I think we undermine his love.

Marriage Metaphor as God’s Love and Commitment

Now, finally, the last thing that I think we are reminded of from the marriage metaphor, we’ve looked at some pretty negative things here, but as we come to a close the marriage metaphor in the prophets reminds us of the abiding love and commitment of God to his people.

When you see the wrath and hatred of God for sin then you can also come to a place where you truly appreciate his mercy and grace. The same God who is going to punish his wayward wife is also the God who would ultimately restore her. Remember God says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love. My love and my commitment to you is forever.” On the basis of that, God cannot give Israel up, God cannot stop loving her, if God’s love is an eternal love, there’s nothing that can cause us, or nothing that can cause God to love us more. There’s also nothing that can cause God to love us less.

So there’s this abiding commitment in the book of Hosea, which is a book about God’s punishment of his unfaithful wife, the Lord says in Hosea chapter 11 verses 8 and 9 “how can I give you up on Ephraim” you know it’s like I have to
carry out my justice and my anger and my wrath against you, I have to execute this judgment, the justice side of my character demands that, but I also I love you. How can I give you up?” Then he says in verse 9, “because of that, I will not carry out the full fury of my anger against you, I’m not going to completely consume you or destroy you” and we’re driven to this place where we ask the question, why? How could God love his people this much in light of hundreds and hundreds of years of unfaithfulness? There have been times where couples have come to me as a pastor to be married, and I will ask in my mind or ask them directly, “what has ever led you to want to marry this person?” Well, we can definitely ask that about God and Israel or about Christ and the church, but the Lord says, “I have an abiding commitment to my people.”

So, in the Old Testament there is the reality of God divorcing his wife. Jeremiah chapter 3, “I’m going to give her a certificate of divorce, I’ve already written that out, I’ve already given it to the people of Israel; the same thing is about to happen to Judah, but there is also the promise that that divorce is only temporary.” The severing of the relationship has a time limit. So when we come to the prophet Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah says, “where is the certificate of divorce that I gave your mother? It’s no longer there because God is going to take his people back. In Isaiah 54 the barren woman who is alone, a widow, and childless is going to become God’s pure bride all over again. She is going to have so many children that the city of Jerusalem will not be able to contain her. In Isaiah 62, Israel is given a new name because God is going to take her as his bride. The relationship in Hosea as he goes and he takes his wife back is a picture of how God is ultimately going to restore Israel.

**Restoration of the Relationship**

I want to close this lesson by a verse in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 22, remember the plot of the book is that it’s not just about an unfaithful wife, it’s not just about a broken marriage, it’s about God restoring that relationship. In chapter 31 verse 22 it says this, “the Lord has created a new thing on the earth, a woman
“encircles a man.” There’s been all kinds of discussions about what that verse means. The early church interpreted this as a reference to the virgin birth of Jesus. I believe what it’s taking about is in some ways, God does his work of recreating and restoring the woman. Israel, is going to encircle, she’s going to embrace, she’s going to hold onto her husband. As God changes her and transforms her, she is going to be absolutely faithful to him, and that marriage between God and his people is ultimately going to be everything that God designed it to be.

There’s a story in the book of Jeremiah that begins in chapter 2. It’s the story of a broken marriage, but the book of Jeremiah as a whole is ultimately about how God will restore that marriage and bring his people back to himself.

Transcribed by Lauren Park, Kathryn Rubin, Caleb Holt, Caroline Walton, Madison Rachels edited by Erika Floyd
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Review

In our previous sections we’ve taken some time to look at Jeremiah 1 and 2 and I do believe these are formative chapters for our study of the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah and the call of the prophet, actually introduces the themes that are going to work their way through the book. Then we have the opening message of Jeremiah chapter two, verse one all the way to chapter four, verse four. This message is going to introduce the plot of the book. Judah is God’s unfaithful wife and the stories of Jeremiah’s life, the narratives that are there, the sermons, the poetry, the prose, all of these things are working us through the complicated story of how the Lord is going to take his people through the exile and then ultimately restore them and repair this broken relationship.

We looked at the metaphor and the figure of Israel as God’s unfaithful wife and how important that is to the book. The prophets are speaking primarily to our emotions not just to inform us of facts, they want us to feel the message. They want us to sense the pain, the anger the betrayal the Lord feels. They want us to also understand the depravity of Israel’s sins and the significance of their betrayal of the Lord.

Introduction to Literary Genres

Now along with metaphor and images which the prophets are very effective at using one of the other things that has helped me is to better understand it is the literary genres that appear in the prophets. The literary forms are the way that they communicate their message. We're going to take a look at some of those in chapter two here.

Every day that our morning newspaper arrives whether we look it up online or read the hard copy we are actually practicing genre criticism because we
understand the literary forms that are in the headline. When I see a headline that says “Lions Invade Cincinnati” I realize that I don’t need to call the police in Ohio to warn them about this. If I’m a movie buff or a TV guy, I know how to read the movie listings or the TV guide because I know it’s something that’s important to me. If I see a story in the center of the paper that says the “presidents policies are a failure” I understand that it’s an opinion, it’s an editorial, and it may or may not be accurate. I’m able to read the paper and be informed in a sensitive way because I understand the literary forms and the genres.

The way that the writers of that newspaper communicate their message is the same way we need to understand the literary forms of the prophets so we can understand the ways they communicate their message. As a teacher, as a pastor, understanding the literary genres often will provide for me the outline of the passage and the way that I want to break this down as I teach it to others. But a literary form or a literary genre helps us know what to expect as we’re going into a passage. It also helps to convey for us what the writer is trying to say.

**Judgment Genre**

Now scholars who have studied the prophet, basically divide the genres of the prophets into two categories. There are genres of judgment and genres that are related to salvation. These are two aspects of their message. The most basic prophetic judgment speech is simply referred to as a judgment oracle. A judgment speech in the prophets contains two primary elements: there is an accusation and there is an announcement. The accusation, the specific list of the crimes Israel has committed, the sins that the target of the judgment speech has committed against God. The announcement, often introduced by *laken*, “therefore” here’s what God’s going to do; the specific things that God is going to do to bring punishment on them for their sin.

We obviously have a genre of judgment speech in Jeremiah chapter two. Judah has been the Lord’s unfaithful wife. Therefore, as a result of this, here are the judgments that he has brought against them to get their attention. Here are the
judgments that he’s going to bring against them in the future if they do not pay attention now.

The prophets can take that basic judgment speech and develop it in several ways. Some of the prophets will add the word “woe” to the beginning of a prophetic judgment speech. The Hebrew word is ɔi and it’s translated “woe.” In the King James it’s “alas.” The Net Bible will translate these oracles: “Israel is as good as dead” and the reason for that it is that a woe oracle. The word “woe” is associated with death and with a funeral. When a person had died often the lament of the person that was left behind they would say “alas” or “woe” for this person. Expressing the sadness and the grief of the death when Jeremiah announces the death of Jehoiakim one of the things he says is that there will not be someone to pronounce a woe for him. This guy is dead. So when a prophet introduced his judgment speech by saying to the people “woe,” he was announcing their coming funeral. He was, in effect, saying to them Israel is as good dead if they do not change their ways.

You can imagine having a dream at night where you have a funeral. You want to see who’s in the casket. Who is it? You walk to the front and you see your own image there. The prophets, in a sense, were calling Israel to their own funeral and reminding them: this is what is going to happen to you if you do not change your ways.

Covenant Lawsuit

Now another type of prophetic judgment speech that I think we definitely see here in Jeremiah 2 and several of the genres are going to collect together in this chapter. We see a civil lawsuit in Jeremiah 2:9. The Lord says, “Therefore, I still contend with you declares the Lord.” The word there for “contend,” in the ESV is the Hebrew word rib which means “dispute.” So what we can imagine is the prophet bringing the people into the courtroom. The prophet is the prosecuting attorney. The Lord is the judge. The people are the defendants and they are working, in a sense, through a criminal trial.
In the covenant lawsuits several things are going to happen. Many times the prophet will call the witnesses into the courtroom as in Isaiah 1, “Hear, O heavens; and listen, O earth.” This is a formal courtroom setting so let’s bring the witnesses in and see how Israel has done.

There’s a rehearsal of the past relationship between God and Israel and in Jeremiah 2:5 the Lord is going to say, “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they have gone so far away from me?” There’s a rehearsal of the past covenant. The Lord’s faithfulness is contrasted with the people’s unfaithfulness. In Isaiah 1 the Lord says, “I have raised up children but they have rebelled against me,” and so has the history of the people of God and their covenant with the Lord.

As that is being rehearsed there’s a reminder of God’s faithfulness to people’s unfaithfulness. The specific list of crimes that they’ve committed, the accusations, the indictment has brought out in the trial setting.

Then the Lord is finally going to pass sentence and it will either be a judgment or a call for Israel to change their ways and repent before the judgment falls upon them. So I want you to try and imagine a courtroom scene where you’re going into the courtroom.

I’ve only had to do this one time where I was the defendant. I was involved in a traffic accident, and it happened on State Road 666. So there may have been some significance to this, but I was charged by the state police for driving on the wrong side of the road. There was a reason for that. I had to go into the courtroom; I had to answer the judge. It's an intimidating thing to do.

But imagine what it’s like to go into the courtroom and to face God as the judge. In a sense, that's what Jeremiah 2 is doing to the people. God is bringing them into the courtroom. I don't know a lot about legal proceedings. I have not gone to law school, but I know that when the judge and the defendant, or the judge and the prosecuting attorney are on the same team when the prosecuting attorney is working for the judge, the defendant is in big trouble. So in a sense we have this courtroom setting in Jeremiah chapter 2 where the prophet is formally
charging them with their disobedience to the Lord.

Later in the chapter, the Lord is going to say to the people, "Why are you contending with me?" And so the Lord is bringing them into the courtroom. The Lord has a rib against them, but the people are protesting and they say that they have a rib against the Lord.

**Disputation Genre**

Now another prophetic genre related to the message of judgment, is that I believe we also have in Jeremiah 2 is a disputation. Obviously, whenever we go into a courtroom there's going to be the back and forth of trying to prove the case. So, the Lord is using the prophet to prove his case, and to convince the people that they truly are guilty.

I believe that a good example of a prophetic disputation is found for us in Ezekiel chapter 18. There's a proverb that the people have been using during the time of judgment to explain their situation, and they say, "The fathers have eaten the sour grapes, but it's the children whose teeth are set on edge." In other words, what that proverb meant is, our fathers have eaten the sour fruit, but the bitter taste and the edginess on our teeth, we're the ones that are experiencing that. Our fathers committed the sin, they broke the covenant, and we're experiencing the consequences of that. So what the prophet is going to have to do in the middle of the situation is to convince them that their understanding of the situation is absolutely wrong. The prophet is going to take them through several scenarios where he explains to them a wicked father does not bring punishment on a righteous son or a righteous father cannot save a wicked son from God's punishment. Ultimately to say that your fathers were wicked and so are you. He takes that proverb that says, "The fathers eat the sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge," and instead he says, "A man will die or live based on his own behavior and his own actions." It's taking a message that the people disagree with, and ultimately convincing them that the prophet is right.

In Jeremiah chapter 2 we definitely have a disputation because the Lord
says, "Israel/Judah has been an unfaithful bride; they have committed serial infidelity against the Lord, and the people are going to come back and say, "How have we sinned against the Lord?"

The prophetic book of Malachi is built around a series of disputations between God and the people. The Lord will say, "I have loved Israel," and the people will answer back, "How have you loved us?" So the prophet is going to say, "Israel/Judah is an unfaithful wife." And the people are going to say, "How are we an unfaithful wife?" Jeremiah chapter 2 is going to try to explain that and try to convince the people of the prophet's argument.

When I think of a disputation, I imagine sometimes what I do when I prepare a sermon. If I am preaching on a difficult topic or controversial issue, I imagine three or four people sitting in my audience. Over here on the right side, there's a hardened skeptic who's not going to buy what I'm saying. Or maybe over here, I think of a member of my family who struggles with something, and they're going to say, "Yeah, but what about this, or what about that." To really be effective in our preaching sometimes we have to anticipate how people are going to object to what we are saying.

So the prophet comes in, and is going to say to Judah, "You're an unfaithful wife, and on top of that you have prostituted yourself; you have committed adultery; you have spread your legs and advertised yourself under every green hill, and on every high place in the city." There's a good possibility that the people are not going to be terribly receptive to that message.

Think about this in the New Testament as well. In James chapter 4, verses 8 and 9, listen to the message that James gives to Christian people. This is in a New Testament context: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, your double minds. Be wretched, mourn, and weep." We might say, "Is he talking to us?" So, I can imagine if on a Sunday morning I said, "You people have prostituted yourself against the Lord," my congregation may not take that very well. In fact, I was doing a presentation at
an academic conference talking about prophetic imagery and this whole idea of
Israel as an unfaithful prostitute, and one of the professors there said, "Why do
you think that pastors don't use these kinds of images when they talk to people
today?" I did not have a good scholarly answer. My pragmatic answer from being
a pastor was, "Because they want to keep their jobs." So the people are not going
to be terribly receptive to being charged with prostitution and being convicted and
put in prison.

There will be times when the prophets will compare the city of Jerusalem to
Sodom and Gomorrah which is the ultimate city of wickedness in the Old
Testament, and I can imagine they were not terribly receptive to that message. The
prophet Amos speaking to the wealthy women of Samaria refers to them as "the
fat cows of Bashan." He had courage because I would never say that on a Sunday
morning, but how do you convince people of things that they don't want to hear?

**Jeremiah 2: Lawsuit and Disputation**

So in Jeremiah chapter 2 let's look at the elements of a covenant lawsuit
and disputation. What does the prophet do to convince the people that they are
guilty as charged? As we've already talked about one of the things that the prophet
does is there's the extensive use of figures of speech and metaphor. We looked at
several of those in our previous session. I don't want to go through all those again,
but let me remind you of some of those that we just briefly touched on. Chapter 2
verse 3: Israel has been God's first fruits; they belong to him, and they were
devoted to him. When they were, God protected them, and watched over them. No
one was allowed to eat or to devour God's first fruits. When they turned away from
him, God sent these enemy armies to devour them. Chapter 2 verse 24: They are
like a wild donkey in heat. They have debased themselves by their idolatry.
Chapter 2 verse 34: They are covered with bloodstains. Chapter 2 verse 20 and 33:
The image of a prostitute that we have already talked about quite a bit. Israel being
an animal in heat is going to be something that carries over into chapter 5 verses 8
and 9. The prophet describes the people there, "They were well fed, lusty
stallions, each neighing for his neighbor’s wife. Shall I not punish them for these things?’ declares the Lord.” So, here’s God's chosen people being basically described as animals who have lost their sense and are totally consumed by their passions.

Again one of the images and metaphors that stand out the most for me in Jeremiah chapter 2 is the one in verse 13. I think it's one of the key verses that I want anyone to remember about Jeremiah. It says, "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters." God gives living water; he can satisfy your soul; he can meet your needs; he can provide the security that you're looking for. “But they have hewn out for themselves cisterns that are broken and can hold no water.”

From May to September in the land of Israel there is very little rain. It’s a dry season and they would need cisterns in the ground to provide water. Sometimes they use natural rock formations. Over time these cisterns would often crack and the water would leak out so imagine going months without rain and losing your water supply. That’s what idolatry is, trusting in anything other than God to take care of you and to meet your needs. The prophet helps you understand life it’s a cracked cistern.

In this metaphor of marriage infidelity and unfaithfulness the Lord and the prophet in chapter 2 is even going to compare the alliances and the military coalitions that they made with other nations. The Lord is going to compare that to adultery as well. That’s just politics; that’s just real world stuff. You make alliances, you join your army with this army, but in God’s perspective, Israel by joining alliances was committing adultery with these other nations because they were surrendering away God’s exclusive prerogative as their king to be their protector. They ended up in the process of making alliances with these other nations giving loyalty to those nations and to their gods that belonged exclusively to God.

When Jehoshaphat, earlier in Jewish history, made an alliance with the
Syria, it says that he copied the worship practice of the Assyrians, he brought an Assyrian altar into the temple in Jerusalem. So trusting in other nations was as much a form of idolatry as worshipping their gods. That image in that metaphor creeps into the text in chapter 2 verse 18. The Lord says to the people, “What do you gain by going down to Egypt and drinking the waters of the Nile, or what you gain in by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates?” Now I am not sure exactly if anyone will really want to drink that river water, but the image here is that trusting in these other nations and political alliances was like drinking the waters of those nations.

As I was thinking about that in light of marriage and in light of the whole issue of idolatry here I was drawn back to Proverbs 5:15. When the father is warning the son about the adulterous woman, he says, “Drink the waters from your own fountain.” So in a sense there’s a charge of adultery in this passage because instead of drinking the water that the Lord provided for them in their relationship, they were going to other places. So the image of water comes up in chapter 2, verse 13, “You have forsaken the living waters for cracked cisterns.”

Then in chapter 2, verse 18 like an adulterous man or an adulterous woman “instead of drinking the water provided by your spouse you have gone and drank other fountains.” So the prophet is using these images. He wants people to see their betrayal of God and it’s an effective way of communicating that message.

**Jeremiah’s Use of Rhetorical Questions**

There’s a second thing that the prophet is going to do again to convince the people that they are guilty. This is a courtroom setting we have to make our case here. The second thing that the prophet is going to do is that he very effectively uses a series of rhetorical questions. Walter Brueggemann has talked about the fact that throughout the book of Jeremiah rhetorical questions are an effective way again where as the prophet is preaching his message it causes the audience to stop and think. He’s not expecting them to verbally answer, but he is expecting them to take this to heart. So listen to some of the rhetorical questions that are in chapter 2,
the Lord in the beginning of verse 5 says: what wrong did your fathers find with me that they went far from me? I’d like to know. What exactly was it that led your fathers to turn away from me. As they really think about this they are going to have to answer there’s nothing because God was absolutely faithful to us. Chapter 2 verses 10 and 11 the people of Israel I’m sure offered viewed themselves superior to the pagan nations around them, but listen to what the prophet does here. He says, “cross over to the coast of Cyprus and see.” or send to – examine with care. “See if there’s ever been such thing.” You think you’re better than these other nations, go see what they do. And here’s the question: “has a nation ever changed its gods even though they are not gods?” What nation in the ancient Middle East would give up their loyalty to their national deity who provided protection and blessing in their geographical area and begin to worship of the gods? He says, “but my people have changed their glory for that which is not profit.” I mean no nation that worships idols and false gods would change their gods. My people who know the only true God have exchanged there glory the glory of the Lord for gods who do not profit.

Chapter 2 verse 17: all the disasters that happened to Judea, all the things that they have experienced the exile of the Northern Kingdom, before the time of Jeremiah. Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the Lord your God, when he led you in the way? God hasn’t abandoned you, you’ve abandoned God and you’ve brought these disastrous situations upon yourself.

Chapter 2 verse 28, “Where are your gods? That you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can, and save you in your time of trouble. For as many as your cities so are your gods of Judea.” Again these other nations often would have gods that were associated with, very specifically with death and cities and geographical areas. Judea sort of bought into that lie and they have as many gods as they have cities, but where are they? What kind of protection have they provided? Let’s do a cost effective analysis, and ask: Has worshipping these gods really helped us?
Chapter 2 verse 32: “Can a virgin forget her ornaments or a bride her attire?” As I read that I have two daughters that are teenagers or young adults and they love these reality shows, *Say Yes to the Dress* where brides give all of this attention, they spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on their bridal dresses. Would a bride on her wedding day forget her wedding dress? Would she show up in blue jeans, instead of in this beautiful dress she’s bought? Obviously not. But there’s the punch line, “yet my people have forgotten me for days without number.”

So through all of these rhetorical questions a good prosecuting attorney keeps coming back and pressing his case again and again and everywhere. We know that sometimes they can get pretty aggressive and in your face, and Jeremiah is getting aggressive but he wants the people to think and reflect: Yes, we really are guilty, we really have turned away from the Lord. So the prophet is going to use images, metaphors, he’s also going to use rhetorical questions.

**Reflecting the People’s Self-Confessions**

A third device that Jeremiah as prosecuting attorney as he’s making his disputation, as he’s pressing his case, he’s going to use quotations from the people of Judea themselves. Now in an American courtroom, the testimony of the defendant can be so damming, that they are protected from being required to testify against themselves.

What the prophet is going to do, however, is that he is going to let the people testify for themselves, and by their very own words, by their own testimony, they are going to convict themselves. Now what we look at, though, when we see their testimony, and as we look at the transcripts here, what we are going to see is that they often say some very conflicting things about themselves.

Let’s look at verse twenty-three, here’s an audience quotation, “How can you say I am not unclean. I have not gone after the Baals.” The prophet is charging them. Look you have, back in verse twenty, “under every green tree you have bowed down like a whore.” In verse twenty-three, “We have not! I am not
unclean! I have not gone after the Baals!” They are protesting their innocence.

Let’s go down two verses, verse twenty-five, in the middle of the verse, “But you have said, ‘It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners and after them I will go.’” Here they portray themselves as helpless nymphomaniacs. They can’t help it! They are addicted to going after foreigners and foreign gods. Verse twenty-three, “I haven’t gone after the Baals.” Verse twenty-five, “I can’t help myself. We have to do it.”

Verse twenty-seven, two verses later, “You say to a tree, ‘You are my father’, and to a stone, ‘You gave me birth,’” speaking of their worship of idols, and the relationship they have there. But then finally in verse thirty-five, we are back to the protests, “Yet you say I am innocent, and surely his anger that has turned away from me.” What do you mean we are guilty? I am innocent. Why would God be angry at us?

So the Lord says, “Behold I will bring you to judgment for saying ‘I have not sinned.’” So throughout the book of Jeremiah, one of the things that we are going to see is that the people are going to say all kinds wrong things to Lord. “We have not sinned,” “We will not repent.”

Chapter 44 in the last words of Judah to the prophet Jeremiah, “We will go on keeping our vows to the foreign gods.” But imagine as your working your way through the book of Jeremiah the plot is the Lord is repairing this relationship and, ultimately in chapter 31-33 and the restoration section, they are going to come to the Lord weeping and they will confess to him, “We have sinned. We have broken the covenant.” and God is going to ultimately lead them to that place. But as we’re in chapter 2, what they are saying is: “We don’t understand what you’re talking about. We are innocent. We have not chased after the Baals.” But there is still this conflicting evidence. They say to a tree “You’re my father,” to a stone “you have given birth to me,” and “we can’t help ourselves we have to go after other gods.” So there is the conflicting quotations from the people themselves that ultimately
damn them and convict them.

**Word Plays**

Finally, one of the other devices the prophet is going to use in this passage to convince Israel of their guilt is that, he is going to use word plays, and often remember as the prophets were preaching, they were preaching these messages orally. They often using poetry and parallel lines and so to make the message vivid they would often use subtle plays of words. Sometimes we do this with puns or that kind of thing.

There are actually a couple of word plays in this chapter in Jeremiah chapter 2 that I wanted to call attention to. In chapter 2:5 it says, and again we’ve looked at this verse already but here’s another element, “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far away from me,” and the last line says, “And they went after worthlessness,” the Hebrew word there is hevel, “vanity.” It’s the word in Ecclesiastes for “vanity of vanities,”--futility. “They went after futility in chasing these other gods, and they became worthless themselves.” “They became hevel.” So they chased hevel, the wind, cotton candy that evaporates immediately, and in the process they became like what they worshiped. They became hevel themselves.

Again, another word play that basically builds on the same idea is found in chapter 2:8, “The priest did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who handle the law did not know me.” The problem with their spiritual leaders, “The shepherds transgressed against me,” and here comes the word play, “The prophets prophesied by ba’al (ba’al in the Hebrew), and they went after things that did not profit—ya’al (The verb that’s used there).” The word play that’s used between ba’al and ya’al. The very close similar sound there reminds them of what Baal really is. He is a worthless god. They believe, “He is the storm god. He is the god who is going to bless us. He is the god who is going to bring us prosperity.” No, he is the god who is going to bring you to worthlessness.” That idea, and that word, is so important that it’s repeated again in chapter 2:11, “Has a nation
changed its gods even though they are no gods, but my people have changed their glory (*kavod*, the glory of God) for that which does not profit *ya’al*.

So word play between *ba’al* and *ya’al*. They worshiped *hevel*; they became *hevel*. I think that’s really what the essence of this message is. Idolatry, for Israel, as for us, is not just wrong. It’s not just morally evil. It’s stupid. It’s a counter-effective way of living your life because you put your trust, you give your service, you give your love, you give your devotion to anything other than God, at the end, it’s going to end in disappointment.

Now, there is another example of prophetic word play, just to bring in another prophetic book. We have one of these in the “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5. This is one of my favorite ones. The Lord compares Israel there to an unfaithful or an unfruitful vineyard. It says the prophet says in this song, “the Lord was looking for good grapes, or *anuvim*, but instead what he got were hard and sour wild grapes, *beusim*, that were worthless. The Lord was looking from his people for *mishpat*, for “justice,” and instead what he got from them was *mishpak*, which is “bloodshed and violence.” The Lord expected that his people, because of all that he invested in them, that they would produce righteousness, *sedeqah*, but instead what he got from his people was *se’eqah*, which were “cries of distress” because of the way that the rich were oppressing the poor. The point is made through the wordplay very effectively. You can hear it. The Lord did not receive what he expected from his investment. When the Lord makes an investment in his people, he expects a return and instead of getting what he produced, after all of this time an effort, he’s gotten exactly the opposite.

The point in Jeremiah 2 is very similar, the Lord blessed Israel, “And I brought them into a fruitful land, gave them everything they could have possibly imagined.” What wrong could they ever find with God? Yet what the people have done is that they have taken all of that and they have turned to worthlessness. I think this ultimately leads us to what this part of the book of Jeremiah is all about. The message here, the conclusion to the lawsuit, is that Judah, absolutely is guilty.
They can protest. They can say all that they want: “I’m innocent,” and “I’ve not changed.” They have flagrantly violated the covenant and they have flagrantly cheated on the Lord as their spouse. I mean their guilt is beyond doubt. We see that right at the very beginning, and throughout the book of Jeremiah. God will judge them. The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has accomplished what he has said that he is going to do. But what the Lord is also trying to do before this judgment ever comes is that he wants the people to understand the futility of their choices. If they will come to understand the emptiness of worshipping idols, if they come to understand that—look idolatry isn’t just wrong—God didn’t just tell you not worship Baal because he wanted to keep you from that: idolatry is stupid; it’s foolish. Trusting in anything as your ultimate source of security is not going to work. So, throughout this chapter, the rhetoric of the chapter, the point of the chapter is, idolatry is futile. Turning away from God and trusting in anything else ultimately is not going to work for you. Chapter two, verse thirteen, again, they have hued out broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

**Condemnation of Idolatry**

The two halves of Jeremiah chapter two, the first half ends at verse 18, and again that passage about how they’ve chased after foreign alliances along with foreign gods, and chapter two, verse 18 says, “And now what do you gain by going down to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going down to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates? What value is there in this?” We conclude with the same idea at the end of the second half of chapter two, where it says this, at the end of the chapter, in verse 36: “How much do you go about, changing your way.” You make an alliance one day with this people; you make an alliance the other day with this people. It says, “You shall be put to shame by Egypt, as you were put to shame by Assyria. For from it, too, you will come away with your hands on your head, for the Lord has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper by them.”
So within this passage there’s a condemnation of their idolatry, and the futility of that. It’s bracketed by statements about the futility of their political alliances, where they have joined in with the nations that worship these gods. The first section of the chapter ends with, “Why are you going to Egypt? Why are you going down to Assyria?” And then, at the end of the chapter, “you’re going to be put to shame by Egypt and Assyria, these nations that you’re making alliances with, they’re actually the ones who are going to execute your punishment. So don’t do this, don’t turn away from God.” In chapter two, verse three, again the idea of futility, “The Lord treated Israel as his first fruits.” They belonged exclusively to him and it says that anyone who devoured those crops, anyone that touched Israel, God would devour them. But the problem was that when they turned away from the Lord, the Lord took his hands off. He no longer protected them as their first fruits, and as a result of that they became a slave that was subjugated by their enemies to bondage and oppression.

Chapter two, verse seven, the Lord says, “I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and good things.” This is a land flowing with milk and honey! God wanted them to enjoy all the abundance of that, but then the verse says, “But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.” They ruined this good place that he gave to them. So verse 15 says, “The lions have roared against him, they have roared loudly, they have made his land a waste, his cities are in ruins without inhabitants.” So, imagine the contrasting picture here, the picture of a land that is filled with milk and honey. The Lord says, “I want you to come in and enjoy cities and houses and vineyards and crops, and all these things that you didn’t even build or plant, and I’m just going to give them to you as a gift.” But by turning to Baal, and thinking Baal was going to be there source of security, they’ve ultimately turned the land into a wasteland.

Chapter 2, verse 2 is going to say that they followed the Lord in the wilderness. Verse 6 is going to say that the Lord led them in the wilderness. But then in chapter 2, verse 31, the Lord is going to ask them, “How is it that I have
become the wilderness to Israel, or a land of the darkness?” So the beginning of the chapter is rehearsing God’s covenant faithfulness, the Lord brought them out of the wilderness, the Lord brought them out of a land of deep darkness where they were dependent on manna to be the thing that would feed them. Yes, they turned away from God and God became a wilderness in a land of deep darkness to them. All throughout this chapter God is trying to help the people to see the futility of the choices they have made.

Chapter 2, verse 27, goes back to the issue of idolatry, “you say to a tree ‘you are my father,’ to a stone, ‘you gave me birth,’ but where are your gods, how are they going to save you?” As a result of this, we come to understand that the Lord did not just bring his people into the courtroom to pronounce a sentence on them, the Lord brought the people into the courtroom so that ultimately they would change their ways. It gives them the opportunity to repent, the Lord is still working with his people and I think that that's often what the Lord does, he brings his people into the courtroom.

In Micah, chapter 6, "What does the Lord require of us?" Is it all of these lavish sacrifices that we could give the Lord? Is it even the first fruit of our own bodies? No, what the Lord requires of you, is that you “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” If you will do those things, the Lord will protect you. Isaiah calls the people into the courtroom, Isaiah chapter one, he says: "Hear, O heaven; listen, O earth, the Lord has raised and has reared rebellious children.” He raised them, he was faithful to them, but they rebelled against him." What should the Lord do about that? The law said that a rebellious son was to be put to death. But in the end of that judgment speech in Isaiah and at the end of that trial scene, what the Lord says is, "Come now and let us reason together. Though your sins be as scarlet, I am willing to make you white as snow." You're covered with blood. You're guilty, the judge says, "I'm going pass sentence on you, but before I do that, let's meet in my chambers. Let's reason together, and if you will change your ways, I will allow you to live and I will bless you.”
The prophet Jeremiah is doing exactly the same thing here, he says, "Without doubt Israel is guilty, they are an unfaithful wife, they have committed adultery against the Lord, but if they will recognize the futility of their ways and turn back to me, I will spare them from judgment." The courtroom scene in Jeremiah chapter two is really introducing for us, the struggle that the entire book of Jeremiah is about, the plot of the entire book. When Judah will not repent, when Judah will not admit its guilt, when they will not change their ways, ultimately judgment is going to fall, but here at the beginning is a chance for them to come into the courtroom and meet with the judge in his chambers and ultimately to change their ways and to be spared from judgment.
Introduction

The title for our session today is “The Call to Return” in Jeremiah 3:1 to Jeremiah 4:4, the next unit in the book. In our previous section we looked at the “Trial Speech” and the “Disputation Speech” where the Lord uses Jeremiah as the prosecuting attorney. He brings the people into the courtroom; he convinces them of their guilt. So we come to the end of chapter 2 and the verdict is that Judah is guilty of adultery. They’ve been unfaithful to the Lord – remember that was a capital offense in ancient Israel and Judah, and so this is a serious situation. We would think that, in light of that, the only thing that’s left is to pronounce sentence. But as we saw at the end of last session, God as the judge, often after these courtroom scenes, is willing to bring the people back to his chambers and to negotiate with them and allow them to have the opportunity to repent, to change their ways, and to avoid judgment. We saw that in Isaiah 1, the Lord has reared and raised rebellious children, they deserve to die (that’s a capital offense in the book of Deuteronomy), but, “Come now, let us reason together, and though you are guilty, you’re stained with the blood of your own crimes, the Lord is willing to allow you to live.”

Call to Repentance Genre

In the book of Micah, the courtroom scene, what does the Lord require of his people? Israel is given the opportunity to repent and to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before their God. One of the other prophetic genres that we see in the scriptures that are very common – not just the judgment speech, but we also have what are called: The Calls to Repentance. And in chapter 3 and the early part of chapter 4 in Jeremiah, that’s exactly what we have – we have a call to repentance. And in this particular genre what happens is that the prophet is specifically appealing for them to change their ways, and a call for repentance is
Session 10: Jeremiah 3:1-4:4: The Call to Repentance [Shuv] 172

going to include two things. It will include the appeal to change, but then there will also be motivations that are offered as to why that change should happen. Sometimes the motivations are positive: “If you change your ways, if you do what the Lord will ask you to do, then the Lord will bless you in these specific ways. If you do not change your ways, then these are the punishments and the consequences that the Lord will bring against you.” The goal of the preaching of the prophets was not just to announce that God’s judgment was coming – if that was the Lord’s sole purpose he would simply send the judgment – but the prophet Amos says that Lord does not bring calamity on the city without first warning the people through a prophet. So ultimately, behind all of the preaching of the prophets in some sense is an appeal for the people to change their ways. Jeremiah chapter 3:1-4:4 is our next unit. It is a Call to Repentance – that’s how we would label its literary form.

**Call to Repentance in Amos**

I thought we might take a minute before we look at that passage and note a Call to Repentance in another prophet – the prophet Amos, who is in some ways a precursor to Jeremiah, and was one of the prophets to the northern kingdom of Israel during the Assyrian crisis. In Amos 5:4 and 5 and several other verses here, we see a clear Call to Repentance. Here’s what the Lord says, verse 4: “Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel and do not enter into Gilgal, or cross over to Beersheba, for Gilgal shall surely go into exile and Bethel shall come to nothing.” So the Lord says, “Seek me and live!” Do not seek the sanctuaries like Bethel or Gilgal or Beersheba because you’re just going to go there and do your rituals. God’s not going to respond to that. “Seek me,” and the positive motivation is: you will be allowed to live.

When Moses had given the law to the people at the very beginning, “choose for yourself between life and death.” In a sense the prophet is putting that exact same choice in front of the people. It goes onto say again another appeal in verse 6: “Seek the Lord and live!” There’s the positive motivation: “choose for
yourselves life or death.” Now, here’s the warning: “Lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph and it devour with none to quench it for Bethel.” So you can either choose to seek the Lord and live, or God’s going to break out like a fire and consume the people. There’s a positive and negative motivation there. In verse 14, “Seek good and not evil.” Again the motivation: “that you may live.” Then further there is the promise so that the “Lord, the God of hosts will be with you as you have said.” Verse 15: “Hate evil and love good, establish justice in the gate.” Alright, change your ways, the practices of injustice. It may be that the Lord the God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. The prophet says there’s always the possibility that if we change our ways, God may avoid and relent from sending the judgment and we will be allowed to live. The chapter goes on in verses 21-24, the Lord says, “I hate and I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. And the peace offerings of your fattened animals - I will not look upon them. Take away the noise of your songs. To the melody of your harps, I will not listen.”

The prophet is not opposed to the rituals; what the prophet is opposed to is the rituals without the lifestyle. So he says, get rid of all this external stuff that you’re doing for me, and “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” There’s a Call to Repentance there: get rid of the empty ritual, and instead do the things that God has commended you. If you do that, there’s always the possibility that you will live.

Jeremiah’s Situation

That passage again in Isaiah, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.” If they will change their ways, the Lord will remove the blood stains. It’s not just a guarantee, “I’m going to forgive you no matter what.” If you change your ways, I will graciously forgive you. And it says that if you do what God says, you will be allowed to eat and to enjoy the good of the land; and the Hebrew verb to eat is “Akul” – you’ll enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land. But if you do
not repent, if you do not stop the sinful ways, that the Lord has indicted you for, then you will be consumed by the sword; and the word there for consumed is “akul.” So the choice in front of them is: you can either eat or be eaten. And if you obey God, you will eat and enjoy the blessings of the land; if you do not obey God, you yourselves will be eaten and consumed by the sword. So the Call to Repentance is always going to make the appeal for change, but along with that there are the positive and the negative motivations.

We would expect God to simply pronounce the sentence, but the Lord is a God who is constantly willing to forgive his people. I think about the fact that God reveals himself to Moses as “I Am” in Exodus 3. And in many ways that’s a mysterious name. It always reminds me of “Who’s on First” – the old comedy routine with Abbot and Costello – the Lord just doesn’t seem to want to give him an answer. But part of the mystery there is that the Lord is going to fill out the meaning of that name by the dealings with his people. When the Lord forgives the people after they’ve sinned with the golden calf, he says, “I am a God who is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in hesed, and abounding in covenant faithfulness.” That becomes a confessional statement about the Lord throughout the Old Testament. That’s one of his characteristics. He is compassionate, he is merciful, he keeps his covenant, he is slow to anger – literally in the Hebrew, “He has a long nose” – it takes a long time for God’s nose to get red and angry and to flare where he’s going to respond in judgment. We see that throughout the Old Testament.

By the time that we get to Jeremiah, there have been hundreds of years of covenant infidelity, and so we come to the end of chapter 2, it makes perfect sense if God were simply to pronounce a sentence on his people, but the fact of the matter is he’s giving them an opportunity to repent. God does that! That’s what God is like. I rejoice in the fact that I can see that and experience that, and I know that’s happened in my life as well.
Before we ever get to Jeremiah, there have been times where God has basically given Jerusalem a deadline and said, “This is it. This is the end!” In the 8th century, the century before Jeremiah, the prophet Micah said in Micah 3: 9-12, “Zion is going to be plowed like a field and the temple mount is going to become a heap of ruins.” It’s a straightforward statement of judgment. There’s no, “Well, maybe he will, maybe he won’t.” But the people responded to God, the king responds to God properly, and the Lord relented from sending that judgment. In the half century before the time of Jeremiah’s ministry, king Manasseh carried out his wicked reign – the worst king that Judah ever had. And the Lord says in one place, “I am about to wipe Jerusalem like a dish.” So, there’s already been at least two times where it looked like God has said, “That’s enough! I’m going to judge.”

But when we come to the time of Jeremiah, the last days of the nation of Judah in the second half of the seventh century, and the Lord is still giving them the opportunity to repent, even in the last days. I remember a politician a few years ago explaining why they had not fulfilled promises to carry something out at a specific time. They said, “You have to understand that we’re operating with a flexible deadline, or a movable deadline.” And in many ways that’s how God deals with Israel.

God’s Mercy

He comes to them in 701 BC and says, “Okay, I’m done. Jerusalem is going to be turned into a heap of ruins; the temple is going to be brought down.” Hezekiah and the people respond; God relents from sending the judgment. Manasseh, he’s the worst king that Judah has ever had, he’s sacrificing his own sons, and he’s filled Jerusalem with bloodshed. “I’m done! I’m going to judge them!” Josiah comes along, turns back to the Lord; and the Lord relents. Josiah was the last godly king. The four kings that come after him are ungodly in every way. Everyone did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. God is still giving an
opportunity for the people to repent. That’s the kind of God present in the Old Testament.

John Goldingay says that many times we compare the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, and we think that the God of the Old Testament is the angry, judgmental, wrathful God, and the God of the New Testament is the God of love and mercy. He says in many ways when we look at the God of the Old Testament, he’s more the forgiving grandfather many times. The God of the New Testament – the time has come that the Lord is overlooking the times of ignorance of the past, and he’s demanding that people repent. Both sides of God are reflected in both the Old and the New. But in a sense he has a point: God is loving, gracious, and merciful and that’s a side of the God of the Old Testament that I think often many people have missed and don’t understand.
Return, Turn Around, Repent \([shuv]\)

So in light of the indictment in chapter 2 there’s every reason to think that there is no opportunity for Judah to repent. That’s the issue that we’re going to get into as we work our way through this text. The issue of returning to the Lord is going to be raised in chapter 3:1 and 3. There’s a key word in the book of Jeremiah that’s going to be used a number of times, in fact I think it’s probably the key theological term in the book, but it’s a term that is especially important in this book, and it’s the word “\(Shuv\),” which means to “turn” or to “repent.” Now, in a literal sense, it means to “turn around,” and it can be used in that way. In a more theological sense, it can be used both in a positive and a negative way in the Old Testament. In the negative way it talks about turning away from God. We refer to people that have backslided; they have slid back away from their devotion and loyalty to God. That’s the idea of \(shuv\) in its negative connotation. The positive connotation is that \(shuv\) means to repent, or to change your ways, or to turn back to God. We’re actually going to see the term used in all of those ways here in this specific chapter. In Jeremiah 3:1 to 4:4, I think my numbers are correct here, the root \(shuv\) is used 17 times in this one section. So, as I always tell my students, “Pay attention for things that are repeated,” and even I am not dull enough to miss the fact that the word \(shuv\) is fairly important here.

Marriage Metaphor

So in the beginning section, Jeremiah 3:1, the whole issue of the possibility of return is raised. I want to spend some time on this first verse. Here’s what it says: “If a man divorces his wife and she goes away from him.” Here’s our marriage metaphor: if the Lord divorces Israel or Judah, and Israel or Judah goes away from him, and becomes another man’s wife, will he, the husband, “return” to her? And there’s our word: \(shuv\). If a man divorces his wife, is it possible for him to \(shuv\) and to go back to his first wife? “Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers, would you return to me?” declares the Lord.”
Now what we have to understand here is the divorce law of the Old Testament. We also need to understand that the prophet is basically raising a question here: is it possible for there to be a shuv between Israel and the Lord, or between Judah and God, after the way that they have turned away to these other gods and involved themselves – is that even possible? In the beginning verses here the possibility of this does not seem very likely. When it says, “Would you return to me?” Really the answer that’s being expected here, we could almost phrase the question: “You wouldn’t expect to be able to return to me, would you?” declares the Lord.” And the negative answer to that is expected becomes more clear when we understand the way that Jeremiah is alluding here to the divorce law that’s found in the Mosaic Law.

The key passage on divorce in the Pentateuch and the Mosaic Law is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This verse is so important to what’s going on in Jeremiah 3, that I really need to just take a minute to read through it.

Here’s what the law said, “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes a certificate of divorce and puts in her hand and sends her out of the house and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife and the latter man hates her and writes a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies [who took her to be his wife], then her former husband [the first husband who sent her away], may not take her again to be his wife. And after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you will not bring sin upon the land, that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.”

Here’s basically the way that this worked. The Old Testament divorce law said that if a man and a woman divorced, if the man gave her a certificate of divorce, he was required to put that in writing. The divorce was allowed here if he found something that was indecent in her, and we’re probably talking about something morally objectionable – it’s not simply she burned the toast like some
of the rabbis would later say. If that man gave her that certificate of divorce, and if she married another man, what the Law stipulated was that she could never return to her first husband ever again.

Now remember God was not approving of divorce, he was not endorsing divorce, God’s original design was that a man and a woman were to be married, they were to cleave together. This was a permanent union. But Jesus says that the Mosaic Law allowed divorce because of the hardness of man’s heart. What Deuteronomy was trying to do was to limit the practice of divorce; it was trying to make sure that if a man would put away his wife, and the man here is the one that has the prerogative of doing that, that he would only do that after very careful reflection. Men in Israel were not to trade around their wives like baseball cards. So he had to give her a certificate and he had to realize that “if, I send this woman away, and if she marries another man, I can never take her back.”

When Jeremiah is thinking about the possibility of Israel coming back to the Lord, he is alluding specifically to this divorce law. And based on what this law says, the possibility of Judah coming back to God doesn’t seem likely. Now let me mention some specific ways that this divorce law is echoing itself behind Jeremiah 2:3. Remember the divorce law said that if a man finds something “indecent” in his wife; the Hebrew word there is 

matzo

. We’re going back to Jeremiah 2:5, raising a question for Israel, the prophet says, “what wrong did your fathers find in me?” 

Matzo

. So has Israel found something in God that would make God worthy of divorce? Down in Chapter 3:6-10, the Lord is going to talk about his relationship to the northern kingdom of Israel, and in verse 8 he is going say, “I have given her a certificate and a decree of divorce.” So the Lord himself has followed the process that’s in Deuteronomy 24; he’s given them a certificate of divorce. As we think of the problem of divorce in our society, just thinking about the fact that the Lord himself has gone through that experience. We tend to want to make people second class citizens that go through these kind of things; the Lord experienced that with his own relationship with Israel.
When the divorce law talked about the first husband taking his wife back, the term that is used there is the word *shuv* – would he be allowed to return to take her? The verbs *shuv* and *laqach* – that’s the word that’s being raised here. Would Israel be able to return to the Lord?

In light of the fact that the husband in Deuteronomy 24 was not allowed to return to his first wife if she had married someone else, the question at the end of verse 1: “Would you now return to me?” is expecting a negative answer. Now in the NICOT commentary on Jeremiah, John Thompson says, “Well, the Lord actually has a loophole here that gets him around Deuteronomy 24, because Israel was never actually married to these other gods.” But I think that really misses the point. In fact, what’s going on here is that the situation that’s envisioned in Jeremiah 3 is much more flagrant than what we have in Deuteronomy 24. Judah has not simply just married another man, they have committed infidelity after infidelity after infidelity. In light of Deuteronomy 24, in light of the character of a righteous husband like God, “‘Would you now return to me?’ declares the Lord;” the answer would be, “No.”

One other connection, and we’ll wrap up with this is that Deuteronomy 24 will talk about the fact that if a man returned to take his first wife back after she had been married to another man, it would make the land unclean – *tameh*. There are a number of references in chapter 2 to how Israel has defiled the land and again the word that is used there is *tameh*. In chapter 3:1 in Jeremiah: “Would not that land be greatly polluted?” The root there is another Hebrew word *qanaph*, but the same basic idea here: when a woman had been unfaithful to her husband after the divorce had taken place, for him to go back to her, in a sense, would pollute the land. So everything about this reference to Deuteronomy 24 that Jeremiah develops here expects us again to say, “I don’t think this relationship is restorable.” They’re indicted in chapter 2, they’re unfaithful, they’re guilty of adultery. In a sense the Lord could command the death penalty in light of the Pentateuch. In light of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomy 24, there’s not great
likelihood that they could ever come back to the Lord anyway. This seems like a hopeless situation.

Now as we move forward into chapter 3, verse 2 again is going to say, “Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land [ganaph] with your vile whoredom.” So they have defiled everything that Deuteronomy 24 warned would happen when marriage was not respected – that’s happened in Israel’s relationship with God. Now the Lord has responded with judgment.

“Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rains have not come, yet you have the forehead of a whore; you refuse to be ashamed. Have you now just called me, ‘My father, you are the friend of my youth--will he be angry forever, will he be indignant to the end?’ Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.”

The possibility of return doesn’t seem very likely in light of Israel’s attitude or Judah’s attitude. They continue to practice these sins and these adulteries. They have a hard heart. They’re not even ashamed of what they’ve done. In light of this, return doesn’t seem possible!

Recent History and Return

Chapter 3:6-11. Past history doesn’t seem to indicate that return is possible. Present history doesn’t suggest that as well. In the message that’s given to Israel and to Judah in chapter 3:6-11, our word shuv becomes very prominent. So let me read what’s going on here. “The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: ‘Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel?’” And there’s our first use of the word shuv; the word shuv, faithless – it can mean turning to the Lord, but it can also mean turning away from the Lord. So the way that the Lord describes the northern kingdom is: “She’s a turning away one.” So the Lord wants them to turn in the right direction back to him, what Judah and Israel have continued to do is to
turn left and to go as far away from him as they can go. They’re like Jonah running away from the presence of God.

“Have you seen what faithless Israel did,… how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore?” That’s the northern kingdom. “And I thought, ‘After she has done this, she will shuv, she will return to me,’ but she did not return, and her treacherous sister, Judah, saw it.”

So Israel is a turning-away people, they are a shuv people who are turning away from God. Judah is a treacherous people. And the Lord says, “I punished Israel and in light of this, I believed that my people Judah, my other wife, they would see this and they would shuv back to God, but they are responding just like Israel did.” So in the recent history here they have not turned back to God any more than Israel did.

He goes on to say in verse 8, “She saw that for all of the adulteries of the faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce.” Judah saw this. They saw what happened to turning-away Israel. Yet her treacherous sister did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. “Yet for all of her treacherousness she did not shuv – return to me with her whole heart.” Israel did not return. Likewise, in recent history, Judah has not returned. In a sense, Judah is worse than Israel because they saw what happened to their sister and yet they continued in their sinful ways. The people in the southern kingdom of Judah would say, “Hey, look we’re not as apostate as the northern kingdom. We have the approved sanctuary Jerusalem, we follow the leadership of the Davidic king.”

Jeremiah’s rhetoric however is, “You’re worse than Israel because you haven’t learned from their example.” So past history- they’ve committed all sorts of whoredoms, they’ve done this repeatedly throughout their history. In present history, they have not learned from the example of turning-away Israel, and so you think, “Wow, God is finished!” But here’s the amazing thing: there is a turn in
verse 11 in this passage and what is going to happen is that there are going to be repeated calls for the people to return.

Let's think about what that means. At the beginning of chapter 3, in light of Deuteronomy 24, it seems impossible on the basis of law that God himself had established that he could ever take his wife back. Here’s the point: God loves Judah so much, that he is willing to set aside his own divorce law to take his people back. That’s an amazing degree of love. In light of the past history, in light of the present history where Judah and Israel have not returned, the Lord is still saying to his people, “There’s still a chance! The deadline has moved again,” and God is giving his people an opportunity to return. So what's going to happen in the second half of chapter 3 after all these reasons why there should be no return, there is repeatedly a call, “Return to me and I will restore you.” Verse 11: “The Lord said to me, ‘Turning-away Israel has showed herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, this, ‘Return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord, I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful,’ declares the Lord.’” There’s our first call: “Return to me.”

Setting in Josiah’s Day

Now historically it tells us that Jeremiah proclaimed these words toward the north in the early days of his ministry during the time of Josiah. The Lord, I think, is calling the exiles from the Assyrian crisis to return to the Lord, to join themselves back to Judah, and in Josiah's day, it looks like the possibility of a national reunification. If the people of Israel will abandon their apostate ways and turn back to the Lord they can join with Josiah and be part of this. We know, historically, that didn’t happen. So what this message now means that in a historical way it was applied to that specific situation, now as part of the canonical biblical text, it has become a recurring call for Israel, even after the destruction of Jerusalem has occurred, for them to come back to God.
Repeated Calls to Return [\textit{shuv}]

The Lord gave the Northern Kingdom an opportunity in the early days of Jeremiah’s ministry but that didn’t happen. But that abiding, continuing word of God lives on for the exiles. "Return to me, faithless Israel." Here's the only thing they have to do, verse 13: “Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God, and scattered your favor among the foreigners under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the Lord.” Acknowledge your sin! Instead of being like you were in chapter 2 when you were saying, “I don’t know what you’re talking about; I have not gone after the Baals. I am innocent. What have I done?” Just acknowledge your faithlessness, and the Lord will restore you.

Verse 14: Second call. “Return, O backsliding children.” There are two uses of the word \textit{shuv} there – “Turn back to me, O turning-away children, for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.” Again I think the restoration that was envisioned during the times of Josiah didn’t happen – but there's an ongoing call. The Lord, even after the exile or even during the days of Jeremiah’s ministry the people of Judah before the Babylonians took the city, that message keeps being reapplied: “Come back to me! The Lord is giving you an opportunity to return.”

Promise of Restoration

There’s a promise of what the restoration would look like. Remember that whenever the Lord gives calls to repentance there’s always a positive appeal. Here’s the promise of what the Lord is going to do for them: If you will return to me, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. … when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, declares the Lord, that they will no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It will not come to mind, nor shall they remember it,… At that time, Jerusalem shall be called The Throne of the Lord, and all nations shall
gather to it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.”

This is looking forward to the future kingdom. The Lord was promising them a restoration on that level if they would turn to him at this time. Salvation history would be a much shorter story if the people had originally turned to God. But in many ways they’re just like us. So God is continuing to reach out to a rebellious people. In chapter 3, verse 22 – We have three uses of the root shuv in this particular passage. “Return [shuv], O faithless sons. Turn back to me, O turning-away sons, and I will heal your turning away.” So the Lord says, “Look, I know you’ve got a problem with turning away, but if you’ll come back to me, I will do heart surgery on you so that you won’t have this disposition to turn away from me.” Ultimately that’s what God is going to do in the new covenant. “I’ll write the law on your hearts.” This history of turning away is going to be reversed.

Last Appeal

Finally, the last appeal to return is given to us in chapter 4 verse 1, and there are two uses of the verb shuv in this passage as well. “If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return.” That’s what the Lord wants! And here’s what that will look like: “If you remove your detestable things from my presence and do not waver” – look, you’re going to have to get rid of your idols. It can no longer be God plus all of these other gods. It’s going to have to be YAHWEH alone. If you swear as the Lord lives in truth, and in justice, and in righteousness, “Then nations shall bless themselves in him and in him shall they glory.”

Abrahamic Covenant

Now this passage is important because it reminds us what is at stake in the turning of Israel. The turning of Israel was not just important for Israel and for the blessings that Israel would experience in the land as the chosen people of God. This passage takes us back to the Abrahamic covenant. Remember, in the Abrahamic covenant God made three specific promises to Abraham. He said, “I’m
going to make you a great nation, I’m going to give you a land, and all nations will be blessed.” In other passages it says, “All nations will bless themselves in Abraham.”

What God had designed was that Abraham and his people, the chosen people of God, would mediate, as a kingdom of priests, God’s blessing to the other nations. What Jeremiah is reminding the people of in chapter 4 is that not only has your sin affected you, your sin has deprived the other nations to whom you were to mediate God’s blessing and God’s protection, and God’s presence. And so he says, “If you’ll turn back to me (verse 2), then the nations will be able to bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.”

The design of the Abrahamic covenant will finally work! If you will do what God calls for. So even in these early chapters of Jeremiah, the blessings of the Kingdom of God that are ultimately going to happen in the final kingdom are really being offered to Israel in chapter 3 and chapter 4 in the days of Jeremiah. The things that God had designed – God’s kingdom, God’s blessings, God’s presence, the instrumentality of Israel being used to mediate those blessings – that’s what God is promising to restore here.

**Imagery of Return**

This section concludes with a couple of very effective images that remind us what returning to the Lord is going to be like. Here’s what those images are in verses 3 and 4: “For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, ‘Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among the thorns.’” It is the hard soil of your human hearts. Break that up. Plow the ground so that the seed of God’s word can begin to produce fruit in your lives.

It reminds us very much of Jesus’ parable of the sower. There are all kinds of soil, there’s only one kind of soil that receives the seed and it begins to produce fruit – that’s what a true believer does. Sow not among the thorns. Jesus talked about the thorns, the cares of this world that choke it out. Jeremiah’s using similar imagery here for people in an agrarian society. Then finally in verse 4,
“circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your hearts. O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest my wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it because of the evil of your deeds.” What we have here is that there’s a final call to repentance and now instead of the positive promises of what God will do, there’s the warning just like in the book of Amos that, if you don’t repent, if you do not change your ways, if you do not break up the fallow ground, if you do not circumcise your hearts, then God’s wrath is going to break out like fire.

The image of circumcision it was the covenant sign that God had given to Abraham and his people. The circumcising of the foreskin was a reminder that they belonged to the Lord. That image is used here and in the book of Deuteronomy; circumcises your hearts! Cut away whatever it is that is resisting your turning back to God, and do heart surgery, and ultimately “follow me!”

So we really end up with a very interesting image in Jeremiah 2; what one writer has referred to as the image of the circumcised prostitute. In chapter 2, an unfaithful prostitute who has turned away from her husband, in chapter 4, a circumcised son who is a member of the covenant enjoying all of the blessings that God has provided for his people. In spite of their infidelity, in spite of what appeared to be inflexible deadlines in the past, the Lord is still providing them with the opportunity to return. We need to understand as we study the book of Jeremiah that this is setting in place the plot of the book.

When my wife and I, sit down to watch a movie, or we sit down to watch a television show, if we come to the end of that and say, “I don’t think that movie had much of a plot,” generally that means we didn’t enjoy the story. There wasn’t something there that held our attention. In Jeremiah the thing that is going to hold our attention is, “how do they respond?” I think we know and we understand in light of the history of the Old Testament and what happens here is that Jeremiah’s ministry ultimately was failure from a human perspective, because the people did not respond, they did not listen. We’ll develop this more as we get into the rest of
the book. But just a couple of passages that are going to set this up for us, chapter 8:4-5, “You shall say to them, ‘thus says the Lord, ‘when men fall, do they not rise again?’” A natural thing, you fall down, you trip and then you get back up. If one turns away, he does not return. If you go on a plane trip, you generally buy a two-way ticket and you turn back home. Why then has this people turned away in perpetual turning away – backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, and they refuse to return.

So basically here’s what’s going to happen in the book of Jeremiah: “My people are guilty, I’m giving them the opportunity to return. They can enjoy the blessings of the kingdom, the peace, the security, and a transformed heart.” God will do that for them, or, they can refuse to return, and the fierce anger of the Lord will not turn away. And in chapter 8:4-5 we already have the answer of the people. They will not return.

Chapter 4 says, “Circumcise your hearts, and come back to God.” Chapter 6:10 says, “To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold their ears are uncircumcised. They cannot listen. Behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn.” You know I hear the word of the Lord in Jeremiah 2 and 3 and 4 and my response is: “What an amazing expression of God’s love. God loves his unfaithful bride so much that in spite of what they've done he accepts them back. He’s like Hosea willing to go find Gomer and bring her back and buy her out of her bondage and love her and restore her to that a permanent loving relationship.” They scorn the word of God, and they view that warning with contempt.

Consequences of Refusing to Return

As we work our way through the rest of the book of Jeremiah, we’re going to find out the results and the consequences of faithless Israel refusing to turn back. The consequences are going to be devastating. When we get to the destruction of Jerusalem, in chapter 39 – that’s the direct result of the people failing to turn back to the Lord.
K. O’Connor has studied this book; she notices that one of the things we see in the book of Jeremiah in Chapters 1-25 – that “calls to return” are going to predominate in Chapters 2-10. We’ve already discovered just in chapter 3 and the early part of 4, there are 17 occurrences of the word *shuv*. What O’Connor notes though is that in chapters 10-20, in Jeremiah, there are only three calls to return. There are only three specific places. Then as we move from chapters 21-25, essentially, those calls to return disappear. What we find out is that the book of Jeremiah itself is not a haphazard collection of random messages. It’s making a point: Judah had the opportunity to turn back to God, to experience his love, to enjoy that confessional statement about the Lord, that he’s abounding in mercy, loving kindness, he’s slow to anger, he’s willing to forgive, he keeps covenant faithfulness for a thousand generations. They lost that opportunity. And the tragedy of this missed opportunity to avoid judgment – it’s an awful thing that the judgment occurs. The more tragic thing is to realize and understand that the judgment was absolutely unnecessary. We’re going to see, not just in Jeremiah in chapters 1-25, the message of indictment. We’re also going to see the missed opportunity to repent and to come back to the Lord, and to experience his mercy and his grace.

Transcribed by Rachel Lehman
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Introduction

In this session of the book of Jeremiah we are going to be covering from Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 5 the unit that extends to Jeremiah chapter 6 verse 30. We are going to be looking at the topic of the coming invasion. As we are looking at this, the warnings of judgment that are going to come upon Judah because of their failures to repent, I want to remind us and just give us something to think about at the beginning of this. We are definitely seeing a relationship of cause and effect between what we studied in the last section and what Jeremiah is warning about in this section. Judah refuses to respond in a positive way to God’s offer of repentance and avoidance of judgment. Perhaps there is the possibility God will relent from judgment, these are the consequences that they are going to experience. I think in some ways it’s like the beginning part of the book of Judges you have a cause, Israel did not drive the Canninites out of the land as a result of that the consequence was that they began to worship their gods and the Lord subjected them to the series of judgments. We have the same thing going on here.

Sowing and Reaping

We are reminded of the spiritual principle of sowing and reaping. Whatsoever a man sows that will he also reap. Jeremiah is warning the people about the sins they have sowed; he is also showing them the consequences they are going to reap. Hosea said, “Israel has sown the wind, they have reaped the whirlwind.” So one of the principals about sin is that we not only receive back in kind what we have done, but the consequences of that sin intensify and magnify as they are not dealt with.

Let me remind us what was at the end of the last section of Jeremiah that we studied. There are these incredible recurring calls for Israel to *rib* to turn back
to God to return to him and we are left with this question. How are they going to respond? How are they going to react to this? And obviously our initial thought if we have never read the book before, if we didn’t know the history of Israel, or if we didn’t know the story of Jeremiah. Our response would be in light of this incredible offer they snatched it up, right? They returned to the Lord, they grabbed up his grace. How could they fail to respond to this offer so that they would miss the disaster that would come upon them?

**Judah’s Lack of Response**

But we saw at the end of the lesson that these calls to return are not going to be responded to in the right way, and again just reminding us how that’s going to work itself through the book of Jeremiah. Chapter 5 verse 3 says this, “They refused to take correction, they have made their faces harder then rock, they have refused to rib.” Chapter 8 verses 4 and 5, again when someone falls down you expect them to get up, when people go away on a trip and they turn away, you expect them to come back. So why is there this perpetual turning away, why hasn’t Israel returned? The Lord says, “Circumcise your hearts.” Chapter 6 verse 10 says, “They have uncircumcised ears.” And in chapter 9 verses 25 and 26 they have, “uncircumcised hearts” just like all the pagan nations around them. So they are not going to respond in a sense the Lord knows before he ever reaches out to his people what their response is going to be.

In Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 27 and 28, the Lord says, “so you shall still speak all of these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you.” The Lord’s giving them a legitimate opportunity to respond. But the Lord knows in light of their character, in light of Israel’s past history, what the response is going to be: but the offer is genuinely there.

I think this helps us to understand Isaiah. The Lord tells Isaiah to preach and by his preaching he is going to harden their hearts and make them blind and make them deaf. It’s not that God is purposely causing them not to believe in the
message, its simply he realizes that in light of their hearts the preaching of God’s word and the offer of grace is going to make them more resistant. One of the frightening things in the Old Testament is the idea that God often punishes unbelief with unbelief. As we refuse to respond to God there are layers of resistance or callousness that develop over the human heart. There’s a layer of callousness each time we say no to God; that ultimately makes it difficult for us to respond. In a sense, that’s what is going to happen through the preaching of the prophets. There’s a legitimate offer here; but the Lord says I know how they are going to respond. They are not going to listen. They are not going to pay attention. And, in fact, the preaching of the prophets is going to make their eyes more clouded and their ears more hard and not able to hear.

Really, what is happening to Israel and to Judah in this process is very much like what happened to pharaoh during the time of the plagues. The Lord at the beginning of that process tells Moses, I am going to harden Pharaoh’s heart and I’m going to gain glory for myself by delivering my people out of bondage. But when we see the actual working out of the hardening of the heart in the plagues that God sends to Egypt in the beginning the Pharaoh hardens his own heart. In the last series of plagues, and in response to that, God’s judicial decree, his sentence, his punishment on the Pharaoh is that the Lord hardens his heart and makes him unable to respond. He gives him essentially what the Pharaoh wants and Romans chapter 1 reminds us that God does this with the entire human race. We reject God, we turn away from knowledge and so the Lord gives them over to their sinful thoughts and their sinful desires. That whole process is laid out for us. So the prophets are giving the people a legitimate opportunity to respond; but Judah is not going to respond in the right way. They are not going to come back to God. So the message in chapters 4-6 is overwhelmingly a message of judgment.

In our last session we also talked about the genres of prophetic speech and I think it’s important for us to study these and to understand them. As we are going through the book of Jeremiah I do not want to just prepare a fish dinner for you, in
some ways I like for you to be able to fish through the prophets for yourselves. So part of that involves understanding the genres throughout the prophets. We have the genre of a judgment speech and in Jeremiah chapter 5, I would like us to work through, what does a judgment speech contain?

**Isaiah 5: Judgment—Accusation and Announcement**

It helps at times to see examples of this in other prophetic books as well, and so I would like to look at a judgment speech in Isaiah chapter 5 verses 8-25, The two key elements in a judgment speech are accusation and announcement, and often between the accusation and the announcement we will have the word *laken*, “therefore.” Here’s the accusation, the indictment, these are the crimes that Israel has committed, the announcement this is the specific judgment, therefore in light of this, this is what God is planning to do. We have a series of judgment series that are put together as a unit in Isaiah 5, 8-25. I just want us to observe how these two elements interact with each other. This judgment speech in the form of a Woe Oracle, which remember, is calling for the death of the people if they do not change their ways. But Isaiah chapter 5 verse 8 says this, “Woe to those who join house to house and field to field, until there is no more room and you are made to dwell alone in the mist of the land”, There’s the accusation, they have ripped off the property of their neighbors and their fellow Israelites.

Verse 9, “The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: ‘Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath and a homer of seed only an ephah.’” There’s the announcement. The Lord is going to take these beautiful houses away. They’ve ripped people off to get them, the punishment fits the crime. They’re not going to enjoy the houses that they’ve taken.

Verse eleven: “Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them! They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands.” There’s the accusation.
They’re consumed with pleasure and they drink wine by the bowlfuls. They rise up early to drink it. They’re inflamed with the wine. They loved the music and the celebrations and the parties, but have no regard for God.

“Therefore,” verse twelve, here’s the announcement, “my people shall go into exile for lack of knowledge; their honored shall men go hungry, their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down…” We have a long and extended announcement of judgment here and again the punishment fits the crime. They’re consumed with pleasure. They’re consumed with food and drink. Therefore the Lord is going to cause them to starve in exile.

And in the same way that they’ve gobbled down food and wine, it says in verse fourteen, “Sheol has enlarged its appetite and it’s opened its mouth beyond measure and is going to swallow them up.” This is a devastating announcement.

Verse eighteen, we’re back to accusation: “Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with carts of rope, and who say: ‘Let him be quick, let him speed his work that we may see it; let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near, and let it come, that we may know it!’” They’re proud of their sin and they’re dragging it around with a cart and they’re defying God. Its as if they are saying, “Lord if you’re going to judge us, hurry up and do it! If what they’re saying is accurate, bring it on!”

Verse 20, before we get to the announcement, there’s more accusation, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light, and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” Verse 21 is another accusation: “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!” Verse 22: “Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!”
So depending on what the prophet wants to emphasize, he may give a very brief accusation in a long announcement, or, in this case, what he’s doing with these various repetitions of the word “woe,” he’s piling up the accusations. “This is all the evil that Israel has done, look at how guilty they are.”

Finally, the hammer drops in verse 24, “Therefore, *laken*, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness…” Verse 25, *laken*, “Therefore, the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them…” Verse 26, “He will raise a signal for nations far away, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth; and behold, quickly and speedily they come! None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, not a waistband is loose, not a sandal strap is broken; their arrows are sharp, all their bows are bent, their horse’s hooves are like flint…” and they are going to devastate and consume Israel. The people of Judah said “Look, the Lord’s going to judge us, bring it on! Let it happen speedily.” The Lord says the army of Assyria is going to come speedily, they’re not even going to have a broken sandal strap as they come to attack you. My people are heroes at drinking wine, they’re on the Olympic drinking team. They are about go to battle with the Marines, who are heroes in warfare and are valiant in battle. Who’s going to win- the frat party or the Marines? There’s this beautiful judgment speech, accusation and announcement. In these accusations and announcements the reality is the punishment fits the crime.

**Jeremiah 5 as a Judgment Speech**

Now we see exactly the same thing in Jeremiah chapter five and I’d like us to look at this passage as a judgment speech, where, just like in Isaiah chapter five, there’s a mixing and mingling of accusation and announcement. When the prophets use these genres, they are not handed a form by their schoolteacher who say, “You must follow the genre of prophetic judgment speech, it must be this word, it must have fifty percent accusation and fifty percent announcement.” They take these things and creatively use the genres as very effective spokesmen of
God. Sometimes the accusations are what are emphasized, sometimes it’s the announcements, but again it is cause and effect. They have failed to listen to God, here is what is going to happen to them.

In Jeremiah, the Lord gives them the opportunity to shub, yet they have not returned back to God. Here’s the consequence. Again, even in this section, the Lord is not simply telling them “this is what’s going to happen automatically,” this is still part of the process of God attempting to get Israel and Judah to respond to him and to turn from their ways.

**Jeremiah 5:1-5: Accusation**

But here’s Jeremiah chapter five as a prophetic judgment speech. We begin in verses one to five with an extended accusation against the people. Here’s what the Lord says to the prophet, “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her. Though they say, ‘As the Lord lives,’ [which is what the Lord had told them to do back in chapter four, they responded to him in repentance] yet they swear falsely. O Lord, do not your eyes look for truth? You have struck them down, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent.” What’s the accusation? The Lord’s given them this opportunity to return and repent, but instead of taking correction, they’ve made their faces harder.

They’re not going to respond to God, so that’s why judgment has come. So the prophet goes on to say, “Well I thought these were only the poor people, they have no sense,” it says. “I was talking to the poor and uneducated people, if I go talk to the people that are educated, people that are the movers and shakers in society, the affluent people, and the people that know what’s going on, they’re going to respond. It’s the poor people who don’t know the way of the Lord or the justice of their Lord, I will go to the great and I will speak to them, for they know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God.” But they all alike had broken their
yoke, they had burst their bonds. “I thought this was a problem with the uneducated, if we talk to the people with the Ph.D.’s and influence, they’ll respond.” No, they don’t respond either.

Rhetorically, what we have going on here, is the Lord is looking for one righteous person. He’s combing the streets of Jerusalem for one person that he can spare from judgment and the prophet’s having a hard time finding even that. There’s a very similar passage in Ezekiel chapter 9. If we go back to the book of Genesis, we are reminded of Abraham negotiating with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, remember it starts out with if there are 50 people and righteous ones in Sodom, and Abraham ultimately negotiates God down to where if there are ten righteous people in the city, God will not destroy it. Well, if Abraham had been negotiating for Jerusalem, he would have to have gone all the way down to one. In a sense, that’s what the rhetoric is saying here.

**Announcements and Accusations**

As a result of that pervasive wickedness in the city, the accusation in verses 1 to 5 turns into announcement in verse 6. It says there ‘therefore [laken], a lion from the forest shall strike them down, a wolf from the desert shall devastate them. A leopard is watching their cities; and everyone who goes out of them will be torn to pieces.” You’re going to be invaded by a wild animal that will attack them and bring them down. That’s the very brief but very effective and powerful summary of what he is telling him what is going to happen.

**Accusation**

We go back to accusation in verse seven. “‘How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me. You have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full they committed adultery, and they trooped to the houses of whores. They were well fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor’s wife. Shall I not punish them for these things?’ declares the Lord.” There’s the accusation again, and it brings us right back to the imagery of chapter 2 and the indictment the Lord gave there. Israel is a prostitute. I fed them; I blessed them;
and instead of honoring me at the temple, they trooped off to the house of the whores and worshiped their false gods. Chapter 2, “They are like wild donkeys in heat.” Here they are like well-fed lusty stallions like an animal that can’t control his lust. I think both in terms of personal morality and worship for God they have been unable to constrain themselves.

The announcement then becomes, “shall I not punish them for these things. Go up through her vine rows and destroy, but make not a full end. Strip away her branches for they are not the Lord’s; for the house of Israel and Judah have been utterly treacherous to me. They have spoken falsely of the Lord.” So there’s the announcement. The Lord is going to strip them like a vineyard and yet says and in spite of the fact I’m bringing this devastating judgment I will not make a full end to them.

We’re back to accusation in verse 12, “They have spoken falsely of the word of the Lord and they have said, ‘he will do nothing, no disaster will come upon us nor shall we see it sword or famine. The prophets will become wind. The word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them.’” We don’t believe these warnings of judgment.

Verse 14, here’s the announcement, “therefore [laken] thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, ‘because you have spoken this word, behold I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood and the fire shall consume them. Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar,’ declares the Lord, ‘and it is an enduring nation and ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know nor can you understand what they say,” and again it is very much like Isaiah 5. I am bringing this powerful vicious army, the Marines are about to attack. You know the champions at war and at battle are going to attack the frat house, and the Lord is going to bring devastating judgment. They will not be able to stand against them. I am drawn in this passage where we go back to an accusation and announcement.

I am drawn into the passage in verse 14 where it says, “the word of the
Lord in Jeremiah’s mouth becomes like a fire.” I mean do we have any understanding of the power of the word of God? I mean we see all these devastating things that are going to happen. A city, and a nation are about to be destroyed, and enemy army is about to wreak absolute destruction on this place but ultimately it’s not the army, it’s the power of the word of God.

Annie Dillard once said that if we really understood the power that we were evoking when we came to worship on Sunday we would be wearing combat helmets instead of bonnets to worship because God and his word is an absolute fire. As we preach and teach the word of God, the word of the Lord has incredible power. It breaks stone, and rock, it overcomes human hearts. Spurgeon said something to the affect that we as individuals and as preachers do not have the power to give life to a housefly. How do we think we can regenerate sinners? It’s the word of God that does that. The reverse effect of that is that the word of the Lord is also a fire that has the power to bring destruction, and as we are faithful to God, God uses his word to build up and to plant or to breakdown and to destroy but either way God is accomplishing his purposes. The word of God is doing his work and it’s a fire in the prophet’s mouth. Remember what the Lord has said to Jeremiah in chapter 1: “I am going to put my words in your mouth and then you will tear down, overthrow, uproot, and destroy or you will build and plant.” In a sense, Jeremiah’s actually doing these things it looks like what a king would do, it looks like ultimately what God would do. But that’s God working through the power of his to accomplish his purposes.

So the judgment speech in chapter 5 the interplay between accusation and announcement, as you are studying the prophet’s note how these judgments speeches work. If you are preaching a message or teaching a lesson on Jeremiah 5, diving into these different sections helps you to know how to divide your message, and provides the outline for you. This is one of the benefits paying attention to genre. The accusation is that the Lord is about to bring an invading army and that’s what chapters 4-6 are all about.
Images of Invasion

Going along again with genre, I want us to turn our focus back again to another device that the prophets use again: the images, the figures of speech and the word pictures, that an invading army is coming. Now the prophet could have simply given, here are the troop sizes, here’s the numbers and here’s the strategic places they are going to invade with, here’s the time of invasion; but the prophet doesn’t really do that. The prophet doesn’t give us a military report; he does not give a CNN update. What he does instead is he paints vivid pictures of what it is going to be like when this army invades Judah.

As we mentioned in previous videos the name of the nation, and the identity of the army at this point in the book is not even specified. We don’t know who it is. We wonder in the early days of Jeremiah ministry, did Jeremiah himself even know who this was going to be? Maybe there were other possibilities, but Jeremiah is going to paint a vivid picture through various word images. Look at the strength of this army. What is it going to be like when this army comes?

The first image that is provided in this section of Jeremiah is that the enemy army is compared to a ravaging predator. Chapter 4:7, “A lion has gone up from his thicket and a destroyer of nations has gone from his place. To make your land a waste and your cities will be ruined.” Judah is about to have a lion raging and roaring against them. Chapter 5:6 employs the same image. “Therefore a lion from the forest will strike them down; a wolf from the desert shall devastate them. A leopard is watching their cities; everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great.” Can you imagine the picture of a lion being let loose in your neighborhood? That’s what God is threatening to bring against the people of Judah.

In chapter 4:11-13, another image is used another picture is given of what the army will be like. And the army there is going to be like a hot, east, Sirocco wind that blows into the land of Judah with gale force. Sometimes when these winds came in with that kind of power, they destroyed houses or they destroyed
crops. At the very least they brought great inconvenience. I’ve seen images and pictures from Jerusalem of these windstorms when the sand and the particles just filled the sky and basically almost blot out the sun. That’s what this enemy army is going to be like.

Chapter 4:11 says “At that time it will be said to these people and to Jerusalem ‘A hot wind from the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or to cleanse them, a wind too full for this comes for me. Now it is I who speak in judgment upon them.’” So it’s picturing one of these winds that I think during the months of May and June can blow in from the desert from the East. Instead of the calm winds that blow in from sea on the west and that’s going to bring devastation. During the time of the year when the people are harvesting grain, they would go up to the winnowing floors on the top of the hill and the wind would help them to winnow the grain because it will blow away the chaff and the grain would fall on the floor. They then were able to gather together. This wind is going to blow away both the chaff and the grain. This is a wind that is designed to devastate and to destroy. The army in verse 13 “comes up like clouds; his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles--woe to us, for we are ruined.” So you can imagine this devastating wind blowing through the land.

Another picture of the judgment and of the invading army chapter 4:23-26 and maybe this is perhaps in this section the most extreme portrayal of what this invading army is going to do because we are going to hear the echo of another Scripture passage in Jeremiah 4:23. The prophet says, “I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void; and I looked to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all of the mountains and the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert, and all the cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, and before his fierce anger.” If I were to give a quiz now and ask what biblical passage did you
think about. I think most of us know the answer “I looked on the earth, and
behold, it was without form and void;” it was *tohu vevohu* exactly the same
expression that is used in Genesis 1:2 to talk about the unformed earth before the
days when God began creating and shaping. When Babylon invades Judah, it is
going to be like the undoing the creation itself.

We see in times in the book of Jeremiah where the Lord is going to
basically going to undo salvation history. The Lord had taken Israel out of Egypt
at the end of Jeremiah’s life the Lord is going to take them back to Egypt but here
is something much more serious than that, the Lord is actually going to undo
creation itself. Going back to an earlier statement that we made from the Brent
Sandy’s book, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, we see the extremes of God’s
anger and God’s love in the prophets. In a sense what’s happening here is that the
Babylonian invasion through the use of prophetic hyperbole is if as God is going
to undo the earth itself.

And then in the verse that follows, there are further echoes of Genesis 1.
The things that God created in Genesis 1, man verse 25, the birds of the air verse
25, the animals, the light all of those things that God creates they all disappear. So
imagine an undone devastated barren land, that’s what it’s going to be like when
the army comes through. Verse 28, “For this the earth shall mourn, and the
heavens above be dark; for I have spoken; I have purposed; I will not relent; I will
not turn back.” So they refused to turn to God and so God would not turn back to
them. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, in verse 28 it’s the
earth and the heavens that experience the effect of this devastating judgment.
Then, finally, in a verse we’ve already read an actual portrayal of the army itself is
what all these images are about. “I am bringing against you,” chapter 5:15 “a
nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares the LORD. It is an enduring nation; it
is an ancient nation, it is a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you
understand what they say.” And here’s more imagery “Their quiver is like an open
tomb; they are all mighty warriors.” There’s going to be a funeral in Israel. “They
shall eat up your harvest and your food; they shall eat up your sons and your daughters.” This army is going to totally consume you. If I’m thinking about this, the army alone is devastating enough. But something I also hear in these passages is that this imagery is ultimately pointing us to the fact that God himself is going to be the attacker.

When the prophets says that the army that’s coming against Israel or against Judah is a roaring lion, we are reminded in the book of Amos the very first verse “the Lord roars from Zion” and he is coming against his own people in judgment. They are not simply facing a Babylonian lion. They are ready to face God himself. And remember, Amos says, “Prepare to meet your God;” that’s what Judah is about to have the opportunity to do. When it speaks of the army as a hot gale force wind, and of the coming on chariots, and of the wings, and the chaff, we are reminded that God is often portrayed in the psalms and in other places in the Old Testament as the God who is “the rider of the clouds,” who rides across the sky in his cloud chariot. He wages war, and when he comes down to earth, the earth melts and is consumed by his presence. Judah has something much more serious to think about than simply the Babylonian army. God, in his storm chariot, the rider of the clouds, is coming down to fight against Israel.

One of the other images that is used portraying the army that will attack them is in 5:17. It mentions eating up the harvest and consuming their food. I think a portrayal there is given of a locust swarm that would often go through the Middle East and bring absolute devastation and destruction. In fact, if you keep your eyes of the news, you’ll often read of ways that locust swarms today present tremendous problems for people in this part of the world. In Afghanistan, in 2002, they were dealing with the swarm of hundreds of millions of locusts that ultimately affected 4 million people. It was such a severe problem that in order to get rid of these locusts, the people of Afghanistan (10,000 of them) were involved in this. They built trenches, they chased the locusts into the trenches with pieces of plastic and whatever they had, and then ultimately buried them and covered them
up. In 1988, one of the worst locust swarms in history ended up affecting 11 million square miles and 55 countries. Typically a major locust swarm would include clouds of locusts that could extend from a 100 to 150 square miles. This particular one had locust swarms with clouds of 400 square miles, and essentially, involved 50 million locusts that were able to eat 100 tons of food every night. That’s what Judah is about to experience, the armies of Babylon; and God, as the roaring Lion behind all of this, as the rider of the clouds coming in the storm that was going to attack Judah.

**Day of the Lord**

The Lord is using this army to accomplish his purposes. Now there’s also another very important theological concept in the prophets that I want to mention that’s related to these ideas of judgment. When the prophets speak of armies that are going to come to implement God’s judgment on the people, it is often described as the “Day of the Lord.” It’s just a common prophetic expression. In Jeremiah 4:9, we don’t have the term “Day of the Lord,” but in verse 9 it says, “In that day, declares the Lord, courage will fail both king and officials.” So I believe that, as he is describing this devastating judgment, what Jeremiah is doing is that he is portraying this within Israel’s prophetic tradition as the “Day of the Lord.”

When the prophet uses that term, they used it in a way that’s a little bit different than sometimes we think about it in a New Testament perspective. When we hear the “Day of the Lord” we are immediately drawn to the tribulation or the judgment of the last days, and the eschatological judgments that God is going to bring in preparation for his kingdom. The prophets used the term, “Day of the Lord” in a slightly different way. They used the term, “Day of the Lord” to refer both to the judgment that is going to happen in the end times, but also, and probably more often, they used that to refer to the judgment that is going to happen in the near future. Sometimes, for example, as I travel to Virginia to go see beautiful places where we have mountains, you often see two mountain peaks in the distance. They look like they are right together, but as you drive closer or go to
the other side and get a different perspective you come to understand there’s a wide gap between them. So I think sometimes, when the prophets see the coming day of the Lord, they see both the near judgment that’s going to happen in the near future and they, at times, see the distant judgment that is going to happen in the end days of the Great Tribulation. Sometimes it is very difficult as we read the prophets to distinguish the difference between the two, but this expression “Day of the Lord” seems to be related to the idea that God has a day where he, as a warrior, is going to come down and judge his enemies.

Often, in the chronicles of ancient Near Eastern kings or in the records they wrote about their accomplishments, one of the things that is amazing about politicians in the ancient Near East, is that occasionally they lied, fabricated, and exaggerated. I know it is hard to imagine it doesn’t ever happen now, but sometimes they would exaggerate their accomplishments by saying something to the effect of, “I not only defeated my enemy, but I defeated them in a single day.” There’s a passage in some of the Egyptian chronicles that will involve the king moving his troops from places where they obviously couldn’t have traveled to in a single day, but he says, “In one day, I defeated the enemy.” In one of the battles that the Israelites are involved in, “I defeated the Israelites before noon. I took care of them before lunch time.” So the prophetic message is reminds me of trash-talking. God literally will defeat his enemies in a single day, with his power and wrath to do it. “The Day” may refer to an extended period, but it’s as if God gets in his chariot, rides to the earth, the earth melts in his presence, and God simply, by his presence, overwhelms his enemies. The Assyrian kings would often say, “By the power of my splendor I defeated my enemy.” The Lord literally will be able to do that. Now what the prophets wanted the people of Israel to see is that the day of the Lord was the time when God would defeat His enemies.

The element that was difficult for Israel to understand however was that they were the ones who now had become God’s enemies. God had become a free agent; he switched uniforms and now, instead of the holy war traditions where
God would fight for Israel, Israel had become the enemy of God; that is what Jeremiah is alluding to. In that day, the day of the Lord, it’s not going to be the time when God fights for Israel, it’s going to be the time when God fights against Israel. In Amos 5:18-19, Amos (one of the prophetic predecessors to Jeremiah) has already established this idea of turning upside down Israel’s holy war traditions and putting that in the context of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord now becomes the time when the Lord is going to come down and fight against the people of Israel.

Here’s what Amos says about the coming day of the Lord. Verse 18, “woe to you”, And remember what we hear when we hear the word or “Woe” it’s a death sentence. “Woe to you who desire the day of the lord.” Why would you desire the day of the Lord, “it is a day of darkness and not a day of light.” Here’s what’s going on in Israel, they were beginning to be oppressed by the Assyrians and later the Babylonians. The prophet says, based on your holy war traditions, and maybe some of their false prophets of peace, they’re longing for the day of the Lord. We want God to come down and defeat our enemies and to deliver us. They were looking forward to the day of the Lord, the way my kids looked forward to Christmas when they were little children. But Amos said, here’s what you’ve got to understand, the day of the Lord is not going to be a day of light and deliverance for Israel; it is going to be a day of darkness.

Verse 19 in Amos 5: “it’s going to be as if a man fled from a lion.” We’ve already seen that analogy being used in Jeremiah. “And a bear met him, or he went into a house and leaned his hand against the wall and a serpent bit him.” Here’s what the day of the Lord is going to be like for Israel. It’s not a day when God comes down to defeat your enemies. It’s a day when God comes down to defeat you. You’re not going to get away from the judgment. You’re going to be like some who is running away from a lion and you think you’ve got a few steps on him, and you run head-on into a bear. Or maybe somehow, you take a right turn and you get away from the lion and the bear and you go into the house and you
lean with your hand against the wall. You think, “Wow, I avoided that” and a snake comes out of the wall and bites you. You will not avoid the day of God.

In verse 20, “Is not the day of Lord, darkness and not light, in gloom with no brightness in it.” Amos was Jeremiah predecessor; he had established this idea that the day of the Lord was going to be a time of judgment. So the prophets in Jeremiah’s day were saying that the day of the Lord is coming again. Zephaniah is one of Jeremiah’s contemporaries. The day of the Lord is coming and it’s going to be a time of devastation for the people of Israel. Here’s how he describes it. “Be silent before the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice,” the city of Jerusalem is going to be offered up like sacrifice. Verse 8, “and on the day of that sacrifice, I will punish the officials and the kings sons, and all who array themselves in foreign attire. On that day, I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold; and those who fill their masters’ house with violence and fraud. On that day declares the Lord, a cry will be hear from the Fish Gate.”

Verse 12, “At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men. I’m going to find every evildoer and punish them. The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastening fast.” Jeremiah, chapter 4, verse 9, “In that day, declares the Lord; courage shall fail, both king and officials.” Now you see in all of this, there is ultimately a message for us as well. Remember the day of the Lord is near, and the day of the Lord is far. Every judgment that God has brought in history is a reminder that ultimately there is a final judgment in that last day of the Lord.

Isaiah, when he talks about the day of the Lord in chapter two, it is a judgment where God will bring down the pride of all of humanity. Every people, every nation, every individual will face the judgment of God.

**Sowing and Reaping**

What the prophets would say is that the judgments that we warned the people about, the coming of the Assyrians, the coming of the Babylonians, every one of them is a reminder of the principle that we discussed at the beginning of
this section. It is the principle of sowing and reaping. If you look at history and think that we can avoid the judgment of God, you are missing the obvious point. Every day of the Lord little “D” in past history, is a reminder of the great day of the Lord, the future time. The Bible says we need to live in light of that and with an awareness of that.

**New Testament Day of the Lord**

I want to conclude this section by reading a New Testament passage from second Peter, chapter 3, verses 10-13 reminding us to live in light of the day of the Lord that is far from the perspective of the prophets. But the day of the Lord that is getting closer every day. Peter says this, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”

Remember Jeremiah had talked about the undoing of creation. The Babylonian invasion would be like that. This will not be like that, this will be that. Verse 11, here’s the punch line. “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of the Lord, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

I believe that we are living in times like the days of Noah. People are eating and drinking and saying, “Where’s the promise of his coming?” The Lord says, if you want to be reminded of what reality is, look at the past. Every judgment of God in the past, has been a reminder of the day of accounting that is coming in the future. Because of that, as God’s people, we live in light of that. We live in light of the reality of judgment that will fall on those that do not know God. But, we also live in light of the reality of the blessing and salvation. There will come a time when the day of the Lord will be a day of salvation for God’s people. The prophet
spoke of the day of the Lord as something that is near and far. That’s why their message is something that still matter to us today.

Transcribed by Andrew Crossman, Zach Schneider, Anna Bang, Melody Jung, Santiago Giovanini, Tim LeBlanc and edited by Liam Adams
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Lecture 12

© 2013, Dr. Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt

Temple Sermon (Jer 7)

Introduction

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number twelve, Jeremiah Chapter 7: The Temple Sermon.

In our session today, we’re looking at Jeremiah chapter seven and the temple sermon. As I’m working my way through the book of Jeremiah I’m reminded of a young college basketball coach who really wanted to emphasize to his team the importance of the upcoming game. He told them this is the most important game we’ve played this season. The problem is, as a young coach, by the time they had played their seventh game, he had already told them that five different times. As I’m going through the book of Jeremiah, I know there are going to be times where I say this is my favorite chapter in Jeremiah or this is maybe the most important part of the book of Jeremiah. But, in a sense, the temple sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7 in many ways encapsulates what Jeremiah’s ministry was about. In fact, this message is so important that there is a similar message in the second section of the book, Jeremiah chapter 26, and scholars debate about whether this is the same message or a similar one. In both sections of the book we have a significant message where Jeremiah is announcing judgment against the temple. The difference between the two passages is that Jeremiah 7 is going to focus more on the content of the sermon while Jeremiah 26 is going to focus more on the audience’s reaction and the response to that sermon.

So we’re going to begin just by looking at the sermon and I’d like to begin by reading the passage. In church history, we celebrate a number of famous sermons like Jonathan Edwards “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” or George Whitefield’s “What Think Ye of Christ?” In American history we celebrate speeches like Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream.” In a sense, as you think of Jeremiah this is the sermon that Jeremiah is most known for. This is
what encapsulates his ministry. Here’s the message, Jeremiah chapter 7, “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Stand in the gate of the Lord’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter in through these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, or the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then [and we see this if-then the conditional structure definitely laid out here] then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of you to your fathers forever. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We’re delivered!’--only to go on doing all of these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name to dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all of these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all of your kinsmen, all of the offspring of Ephraim.”

Now I think we all understand the incredible amount of courage that it took for Jeremiah to preach this sermon to announce to the people that God is going to destroy his own house and to destroy Jerusalem. In chapter 26, when we see the response of the audience, it’s not surprising the first reaction of the people, the
spiritual leaders that are there to hear this message is: “this man deserves to die.” I believe the reason for that is that in their mind, pronouncing judgment on God’s house is a form of false prophecy. This is God’s house; God has promised to protect it; God has promised to be present with his people. For a prophet to stand and say God is going to destroy this in their mind and their understanding of the covenant which has come to mean an absolute guarantee of protection, that’s blasphemy, it’s false prophecy. So Jeremiah deserves to die.

Theology of the Temple

I think we understand the courage that it took to preach this message a little bit more and where that false confidence came from when we understand what the temple meant for Israel. Now if I could just think a little bit about theology of temple I would like to go all the way back to the book of Genesis. When Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden, in a sense, the garden is not just a garden. The garden is a sanctuary because it’s a place where they meet with God. It tells us in Genesis chapter 3 that God would walk with them and meet with them in the cool of the day. Even more important than all the things that they enjoyed in the garden, was the fact that God’s presence was there. However, when Adam and Eve sinned they lost that fellowship with God; they lost that presence. A cherubim was stationed at the gate of the garden. They were no longer allowed access. So when we come to the end of that section of Genesis and we’re asking the question is it still going to be possible for people to walk with God and have fellowship with him, we go over a couple of the chapters and genealogies and we’re introduced to a man named Enoch. In the midst of all of the people who are being born and bearing children and dying and this sort of repetitious account of life and death, it tells us about Enoch. Enoch walked with God and then one day Enoch was no more because God took him with him. So the possibility is still there. God is reaching out to follow humanity and they’re able to walk with God. We’re going to see with Abraham God says, “walk before me and be blameless.” But when God calls Israel as his chosen people, the reason that he brings them into the
promised land is so that they could enjoy his presence and live in fellowship with him.

We read a passage about the purpose of God bringing Israel into the promised land in Exodus 15:17. Moses says, “You will bring them in and plant them on your mountain, the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.” So when we think of the promised land, we think of the land flowing with milk and honey; we think of an abundant prosperous land. But we also need to understand the promised land was a sanctuary and just like the garden of Eden was a temple where Adam and Eve could meet with God the promised land was also going to be a sanctuary where God could dwell with his people and they could enjoy fellowship with him. Leviticus 26:11 says that God is going to walk among his people. And we hear that at the Garden of Eden, Enoch walking with God, Abraham walk before me and be blameless. The tabernacle and the temple, the place where God chooses to place his name as it’s described in Deuteronomy chapter 12, is the place where God is going to walk among his people. It’s not just a house of worship. It’s not just a place where the people come to assemble. This is God’s dwelling place. This is God’s house. In addition to that, the temple and the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant that are there, the holy place, and they also represent God’s place of rulership.

The word “temple” in fact simply means “big house.” It can refer either to a temple or a palace. The ark of the covenant represents the footstool of God’s heavenly throne. In a sense, the temple is where heaven and earth meet, and God dwells in the presence of his people. In the tabernacle, before the temple is built, the tabernacle is a place that’s God’s house and there are sights, sounds, smells, food and light. These are things that people could see and understand God that lives in the midst of us. As Israel’s in the wilderness and they’re camped out, the tabernacle is at the center because God is ruling in the midst of his people. So Israel has God as their next door neighbor. The temple is not just a great structure
like one of our great cathedrals; the temple represents the dwelling place of God. In Deuteronomy chapter 12 again, “This is the place that God has chosen to place his name.” And so as Jeremiah is standing up and saying God is prepared to destroy this place, in a sense, it overturns all of this temple theology that we have running through the Old Testament.

God had also promised as a result of his presence among the people, that there were blessings that they would enjoy by having God as their next door neighbor. In Psalms 46, it is a Zion song that celebrates the security that God provides for his people, because of his presence. In Psalm 46, thinking about the Lord dwelling in the midst of his people in Jerusalem, here’s the blessing of God’s presence, and the security that people feel because of that. At the beginning of the psalm, it says, “God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.” At the end of the Psalm it says this, “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress.” So the people of Judah, as Jeremiah is preaching this sermon, they not only have a theology of temple, they have a theology of temple and of Zion where God has promised that he is their refuge, he’s their source of security. Here is Jeremiah coming into their midst, and turning over those traditions and saying God is not going to be a source of security for you, instead God is going to judge you, and to destroy the place that he owns that is called by his name. In Psalm 46, the people say that whatever disaster could possibly come into our lives, we know that because of God’s presence we’re absolutely safe and secure. So the Psalm goes onto say, “Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the midst of the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.” They imagine a storm, and not just any storm but an earthquake or a tsunami that shakes the entire earth and the mountains and the seas are roaring and foaming. Yet there’s one place in all of the world that is secure. There’s a storm shelter that is absolutely peaceful, and that’s the presence of God in Jerusalem. In verse 4 of Psalm 46, there is “a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy
habitation of the most high.” And so in the earlier verses, we imagine these raging waters that are shaking the entire earth, but in Jerusalem, in the storm shelter, the one place in all the earth that is safe, this tiny city of Jerusalem, there’s this peaceful stream that’s flowing through it. The spring of Gihon, that was the water supply for Jerusalem, represents the presence of God. Because of his presence, the people of Jerusalem are absolutely secure. Even if there’s a storm that shatters the earth we’re safe, because of God’s security.

Then Psalm 46 imagines another stressful situation. In fact, the two worst things that could possibly happen: a storm that would shake the earth, a natural disaster, an earth quake, a tsunami: and the second greatest tragedy they could experience in the ancient world would be the invasion of an enemy army. Psalm 46 says, “The nations rage, the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts.” There are the same words that are used to describe the shaking of the mountains, or the roaring of the waters, are now used to imagine the enemy armies that are going to assault Jerusalem. The response to that is: “the Lord of host is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress.” The psalmist says, “God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved, God will help her when the morning dawns.” So imagine if Jerusalem is attacked by an enemy army, God is going to be there in the morning to deliver his people.

The psalmist concludes by saying, “Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations and destruction on the earth. He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth, he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The lord of host is with us.” So the psalmist says the two worst disasters that you could imagine happening: a storm that shakes the earth, or an enemy invasion, God’s going to protect us. The presence of God in Jerusalem at his house is like a quiet stream that provides a storm shelter, when all of the other waters of the earth are roaring and foaming. Now Psalm 46 is not the only place that gives us these assurances.
Psalm 48, another psalm of Zion says this, “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.” So Zion is God’s city. It’s beautiful in its elevation, and Zion is described here as a high mountain, though if you’ve been there you know that Mt. Zion looks more like a hill to us. Psalm 48 says, “Behold, the king [is a symbol] they came on together. As soon as they saw it they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight. Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor. By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish. As we have heard, so we have seen in the city of the Lord of host, in the city of God, which God will establish forever.” So Psalm 48, just like Psalm 46, imagines the city of Jerusalem under enemy attack, and God by his powerful east wind destroys that army. We can look at Psalm 76, and the same thing, another Zion psalm, God is going to defeat the enemies that attack Zion.

So imagine yourself as an Israelite, as someone who lives in Jerusalem, coming in 609 BC to hear Jeremiah preach, and hearing his message, God is getting ready to destroy his house and there’s this cognitive disconnect between -- wait a minute -- Jeremiah 7, the temple sermon, and our traditions about Psalm 46, Psalm 48, Psalm 76, and our belief that the temple is God’s house, the holy land itself is a sanctuary. What do we do with this?

On top of that, the Zion tradition in Israel were not just songs. I remember in high school sometimes, we had pep rallies, and we’d sing the school fight song. Friday night we would lose 48 to nothing. Sometimes songs don’t mean anything. But these are not just songs—these are promises from God. In addition to that, these are songs that have been confirmed by historical events. In Jeremiah’s time as he’s preaching this message in 609 BC, there is something that happened almost exactly a hundred years before that, that again seems to be a total disconnect with what Jeremiah is preaching. During the days of Isaiah, one of the other great major prophets, in 701 BC, the Assyrian army had invaded Judah, and the king of
Assyria says that he captured 46 cities in Judah and he trapped Hezekiah like a bird in a cage. Again, we have confirmation of this outside of the Bible itself.

Then Sennacherib and his armies captured the city of Lachish that is 25 miles away and that was designed as a buffer for Jerusalem. The king was so impressed with that that he decorated the walls of his palace with the ways that he conquered and sieged the city of Lachish. And then he marches on Jerusalem. Sennacherib and the Assyrian army surrounded the city with 180,000 troops. They come to Hezekiah and to his diplomats, and they send the letter demanding the absolute and total surrender of the city of Jerusalem. They make this claim, they say: “Do not trust and do not believe that your God, that you worship, the Lord of Israel that he’s going to be able to deliver you any more than any of the other gods have been able to deliver their people from us.” Hezekiah at this point is in a quandary. What do I do? He has tried, as a king, to solve this in all the political and military ways that he can possibly imagine. But now what he does is the best thing that he could have done; he comes to the Lord and trusts in him.

He takes this letter that the king of Assyria had written blaspheming God and saying that the Lord would not be able to protect Israel. He lays it out in front of the Lord at the temple, and he says, “God, I want you to read this. I want you to hear what the king of Assyria is saying about you, that you’re not able to deliver us, God, help us! We’re in trouble!” As a result of that, God answers Hezekiah’s prayer. God delivers him in the city, Isaiah comes to Hezekiah with the message: “Because of your faith, because you’ve trusted the Lord, because you’ve humbled yourself, and asked for God’s help and trusted in him exclusively, God’s going to deliver Jerusalem. The king of Assyria with all his troops is not going to fire a shot into this city.” Miraculously, the Bible tells us that the angel of the Lord went out into the middle of the night and brought a great destruction on the army of Assyria. Sennacherib got on his horse and went back and the city of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. was miraculously delivered.

Psalms of Zion
So, as Jeremiah comes to the people of Judah in 609 BC, almost a hundred years later, the people have come to believe in the absolute inviolability of Zion. We have Psalms! We have Bible verses! We can point them out to you! God defeats the enemies who attack Jerusalem! We have historical evidence! Look at what the Lord has done on behalf of Jerusalem in the past—look at how he’s delivered the city, and in the last days of the Babylonian crisis, we’re going to see Zedekiah coming and asking Jeremiah, “Pray for us, that the Lord might do one of his wondrous deeds!” I really think that the wondrous deed that he’s talking about there is: maybe there’s going to be another Hezekiah-type deliverance.

Jeremiah takes all of those ideas; he takes that tradition; he takes that historical event, and he turns it upside down. He says, God is not absolutely guaranteeing that he will protect the city of Jerusalem. In fact, in this very if-then conditional you have to choose either life or death, Jeremiah’s going to say, “The security of Jerusalem depends on your faithfulness to God.” They had developed an understanding of the covenant that really was a form of presumption; because, their presumption was: “God will always be there for us; God will always take care of us, no matter what. We’re God’s chosen people! God has absolutely guaranteed that he’s going to bless us!” What they had forgotten about were some other important things in their tradition as well. Jeremiah is not repudiating Psalm 46. Jeremiah is not repudiating these other Zion Psalms [Psalm 48, Psalm 76] Jeremiah is not repudiating the idea of temple in God’s presence. He is reminding them about things about their tradition that they have conveniently ignored.

Remember, the temple theology was saying that God was Israel’s next-door neighbor. They believed that God was omnipresent; they also believed that in a special way, God had chosen to put his presence at Jerusalem, and for the people to be able to enjoy that. Three times a year the people made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to be in the presence of God. It was the greatest pleasure and joy and experience that you could ever have in life. The Psalmist says in one place, “Better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere.” But what they had forgotten
is to be in God’s presence, to enjoy God’s blessings and protection, places responsibilities and obligations upon you.

The Psalms not only teach that God is Zion’s fortress; the Psalms not only teach that the presence of God is like a peaceful flowing river through the city of Jerusalem; the Psalms also remind us that there are responsibilities and requirements placed upon those who come into the presence of God. As the people would come to worship at various times, we see Psalms like Psalm 15 and Psalm 24 that are described as entrance liturgies: “Who may enter into the house of the Lord? Who may come into God’s presence?” And the answer in those Psalms, and perhaps the people or the priest would ask the question, and the people or priest would respond back, “Who has the right to come into God’s presence? Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, and who have done the things that are pleasing to God.” Before you walk into this presence, understand the responsibilities that that places upon you.

The idea that God would protect his people in the Psalms; that he was the fortress; that when the enemy armies came upon Jerusalem, he would shatter them like a wind. There are other places in the Psalms that say that protection is conditioned upon the trust of the people. In Psalm 20, the Psalmist says, as the people prepare to go into battle, “Some trust in chariots, and some trust in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.” To enjoy that protection meant to repudiate all of the other things that you trusted in: your military strength; your horses; your chariots; and your alliances with Egypt.

The people in Jeremiah’s day had not met that condition. “Who may dwell in the house of the Lord?” The people in Jeremiah’s day—“He who has clean hands and a pure heart”—they had not met that condition. Hezekiah in 701 BC had only experienced deliverance because of the fact that he turned to God in absolute faith. The city was only delivered because Hezekiah, when he heard the warnings that Micah had preached about Jerusalem being reduced to a heap of rubble had taken that word seriously and had acted accordingly. That had not happened in
Jeremiah’s day. So what Jeremiah is going to do in this particular passage, in this sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7, is he is going to overturn their false confidence that God would protect them no matter what.

Let’s go back to Jeremiah chapter 7. I know it took a while to set the background there, but that’s the context of what’s going on. That’s the ideological conflict behind this message. Over in chapter 8 verse 11, we get the idea of the people and their understanding of the covenant that God would protect them no matter what. In fact there were false prophets that were promoting this message and in Jeremiah 8 verse 11. It says, “These false prophets have healed the wounds of my people lightly saying, ‘peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” And so there were false prophets. They were the ones who were promoting this idea: God will protect you no matter what.

So again putting myself in the mind of a citizen of Jerusalem in this particular day, who do I want to listen to. A prophet who is saying look don’t worry this is God’s house this is God’s city. God is going to protect you, let me take you to some Bible verses that will show you that. Or do I want to listen to a prophet who is saying God’s preparing to raze this place to the ground. So Jeremiah has a pretty difficult job to do here, rhetorically he has to convince the people that their view of covenant is all wrong and again, just like in chapter 2, when Jeremiah accuses them of being a prostitute, he engages in this disputation. How do you convince people to embrace something that absolutely goes against everything they believe? That’s the task facing Jeremiah in chapter 7.

Jeremiah’s Rhetorical Strategy

So what I’d like to look at here is a little bit of what his rhetorical strategy was. How does he preach this message? How does the Lord help him to design this? The first thing that I notice is that the message begins very positively and there is a real opportunity at the beginning of this message. They have a real opportunity to change their ways. There is a hope presented here and in spite of the hundreds of years of disobedience, in spite of the recent history, this message
begins very positively. It says, “amend your ways and your deeds and I will allow you to dwell in this place.” So the Lord is not just announcing destruction here, he’s giving them a real opportunity to repent and to change their ways and to experience the blessings of Zion that were described in the Zion Psalm. Verse 5 through 7 “if you truly amend your ways and your deeds and if you truly execute justice with one another, if you do not oppress the sojourned, the fatherless, or the widow,” it goes on to say in verse 7, “then I will let you dwell in this place in the land that I gave to your fathers forever.”

So there is a positive emphasize at the beginning that they have a real opportunity to repent, to change their way, and to be spared from judgment. It’s exactly what we saw back in chapter 3 with the recurring, the repeated calls “return to the Lord” [shuv]. When the prophet is saying, “if you will just amend your ways, if you’ll just change your ways, God will allow you, it’s exactly the same thing, you have a real opportunity to repent. The message in Jeremiah 7, in the Temple Sermon, only becomes negative at the end when it becomes obvious that the people are not going to respond.

A second thing that Jeremiah is rhetorically going to do is he reminds them of their covenant responsibilities. Look, you cannot just look at covenant and think about blessings. Covenant with God always has promise and obligation and so Jeremiah is going to emphasize and he makes appeal to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments summarize for Israel, their obligations to God and to each other. As we’ve mention in a previous video, what the Lord is going to do here is that he takes the Ten Commandments and he reverses the order. In verse 9, “will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely.” Those are the last six commandments that deal with Israel’s responsibility to each other. Then he is going to say make offerings to Baal, go after other gods that you have not known, that’s referring to the first part of the commandments that talk about their responsibility to God. He flips them in order to emphasize the importance of their social responsibilities because in Judea that’s the particular part of this covenant
that they’ve abandoned. So that’s the second strategy, he’s going to directly remind them of the words of Moses. Moses had warned the people: if you disobey, the covenant curses will come. Jeremiah is saying you have disobeyed, so the covenant curses are here. Remember what God asked you to do?

The third thing that Jeremiah is going to do very effectively is he’s going to, as he did in chapter 2, he’s going to quote the words of the people reflecting their false confidence. In verse 4, “do not trust in these deceptive words, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” Now what we should imagine this as being is that this is their slogan. It really encapsulates their attitude. The threefold repetition of this in Hebrew is designed to give emphasis like in the vision of the Lord that Isaiah sees, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty.” It is a positive affirmation. Here’s a negative affirmation of their false confidence, “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” This false belief that God would protect them no matter what, Jeremiah is turning upside down.

Now do you remember Ezekiel as a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah? Do you remember how he overturns their false confidence in the temple? He sees a vision in Ezekiel chapters 8 to 11 where the glory of the Lord that represents the presence of God. It rises up in the holy place; it goes out of the holy place; it goes to the threshold of the temple; it goes to the east gate of the city, and then it departs completely. The glory of God has left the building and in a sense what that was doing was saying you’re trusting in the protective presence of God to deliver you from the Babylonian army, Ezekiel says God isn’t there, he’s abandoned you, he’s given you over to judgment. What you’re envisioning in Psalm 46 of the Lord being your fortress and your refuge, he’s no longer there. In a sense what Jeremiah is doing is exactly the same thing. The presence of God doesn’t guarantee your protection. In verse 10, the false hope is expressed in the quotation of the people, they come before the Lord after they’ve committed all these sins. They stand before him and in their time of worship they say we are delivered.
We believe that God is going to save us. So these quotations in verse 4 and verse 10, “The temple of the Lord, temple of the Lord, temple of the Lord.” In verse ten, “we are delivered” is a reminder that the people have put their hope in something that’s not going to work.

The fourth thing that Jeremiah is going to do is again very similar to what we have in chapter two. The prophet again is going to use rhetorical questions. Here’s the rhetorical question. Again, a rhetorical question is not just a rhetorical question. It’s designed to make us think. “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and then come into God’s house and say, ‘God is going to protect us’? Do you really think that’s going to work?” When it’s expressed that way, the people get a clear understanding that this is a wrong understanding of God. A related rhetorical question is found in verse 11 “has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes?” Do you think that the holy God of Israel who is untainted by sin in any way, do you think that he’s going to allow his house to be turned into a hide out for criminals? Again when the question is cast in that way, how can they possibly think that?

Another rhetorical device of Jeremiah is that the prophet is going to remind them directly whose house the temple really is. In verse ten, the Lord says, “This is my house, which is called by my name.” That expression, “called by my name,” expresses legal ownership. This is not the king’s house: this is not Judah’s house; this is not the citizen’s; this is God’s house. When they defile that house by their lifestyle and their behavior, God has every right to destroy it.

When the prophet Amos went up to the northern kingdom to preach against the sanctuaries there, one of the priests at that sanctuary in Amos chapter seven comes to him and says, “Why are you preaching against the king’s sanctuary?” Jeremiah’s reminded this is not the king’s sanctuary this is God’s sanctuary and it belongs to him.
Shiloh Analogy

Then, I think maybe the most effective rhetorical device that Jeremiah uses in this section is that Jeremiah is going to use analogies and examples from their past history. One of those and maybe this place didn’t really strike a cord as we were reading the passage but one of those analogies is a reminder of what God did at Shiloh in verses 12-14. Here’s what the prophet says, “Go now to my place that was in Shiloh where I made my name to dwell at first and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel there.”

Let’s talk about Shiloh for a minute. Shiloh was the sanctuary of God from the time of the conquest up until the monarchy. During the days of the judges that was the place where the tabernacle and the sanctuary were and where the people came to worship. God allowed the sanctuary in Shiloh to be destroyed near the end of the time of Judges and in the early chapters of Samuel, because of the apostasy of both the spiritual leaders and the people. It’s an especially effective analogy there because it’s the place where God’s presence had dwelt previously. But on top of that, as you go back to that story in Samuel, you realize that it’s another place where Israel had an absolutely false understanding of the presence of God. They believed that as they go out into battle against the Philistines that if they simply take the ark of the covenant into battle that the ark of the covenant will protect them from the enemy. They have turned the ark of the covenant from something that is a representation of the holiness of God, they have turned it into a good luck charm. They go into battle, they take their good luck charm with them, and the shocking surprising thing that happens is that the Philistines capture the Ark, they defeat Israel, and the people of Israel are routed. That same kind of false confidence that led the people to think God is going to protect them no matter what was exactly what was inspiring the people that couldn’t believe Jeremiah’s message in chapter seven. They were going back to 701 BC and saying, “Look at what God did for us then! God will protect Jerusalem no matter what.” Jeremiah says, “Wait a minute. There’s some history lessons that you’ve forgotten. Let’s
go back to Shiloh and remember what God did there.”

There’s a statement about Shiloh that’s given to us in Psalms 78 verses 56-62. Listen to what is says there, “Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies, but they turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; they twisted like a deceitful bow. For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealously with their idols. When God heard about this, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel. He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind and delivered his people to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe. He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage.”

Until we get to the reference of Shiloh, that could be a description of the people in Jeremiah’s day, exactly what happened back then is getting ready to happen in the future. It’s also appropriate because the sons of Eli, that were the corrupt spiritual leaders of that day during the time that Shiloh, were in many ways responsible for the judgment that came upon the people of Israel. In the same way, in Jeremiah’s day, corrupt priest and prophets are bringing God’s anger and judgment against them. So this is an absolutely perfect counter to the way that they are arguing about 701 BC. 701 and God’s deliverance of Jerusalem is not the only story in the Bible we also have a reminder of Shiloh.

Fall of Samaria Analogy

In Jeremiah chapter 7:15, the other analogy that Jeremiah is going to use something from their more recent history. Jeremiah says, “And I will cast you out of my sight as I cast out all of your kinsmen all of the offspring of Ephraim.” So He reminds them of the fall of the Northern Kingdom. If you think simply because you are God’s chosen people, you cannot be defeated, you cannot be judged; you cannot be destroyed; look at what’s happened to your kinsmen in the north. Going back to chapter three hearing Jeremiah, the problem is that in a sense Judah is worse than Israel because they have not learned from the example that
God carried out with Israel.

People’s Response to the Temple Sermon

So that’s the message. That’s the rhetorical ways that Jeremiah is going to try to convince the people that they need to change. But what we also see is what kind of response to the messages are going to be. Ultimately, that’s what’s going to make a difference. We come to a place where we realize that the harsh tone of this message at the end indicates that the people did not accept, they did not believe, they did not respond in a positive way to Jeremiah’s message. In chapter seven verse 16, we get a shocking response from the Lord here. The Lord says, “As for you, do not pray for this people, do not lift up a cry or a prayer for them, and do not intercede with me for I will not hear you.” The Lord tells Jeremiah don’t even waste your time praying for these people. I am not going to save them. The response of the people to the message is ultimately what’s going to bring their judgment.

The prophet is going to talk further about their idolatry. Verse 18: “They make cakes for the queen of heaven.” This probably refers to the Canaanite fertility goddesses. Down in the bottom part of the chapter there’s going to be reference to the Valley of Hinnom and the Tophet, where they offered these sacrifices to the false gods, where they had even offered their children as sacrifices that’s how degraded Jerusalem had become. By not changing their ways God is not going to save them. God is not going to deliver them.

There’s a special section here at the end of this in response to this message with a couple of interpretive issues that I want us to look at as we wrap this section up. In verses 21 to 23: “Thus says the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Add to your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought you out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them: ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the ways that I command you, that it may be well with you.’”
There are a couple of interpretive issues here. What does the Lord mean in verse 21 when he says, “add to your burnt offerings or add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat the flesh”? What’s that verse talking about? Well, there were several different types of sacrifices in Israel. One of those was a fellowship offering, or a peace offering where a person could come in expression of fellowship or thanks to God. Part of the sacrifice was offered to God as an offering; part of the sacrifice was given to the priest; and then part of the sacrifice was returned to the person and the person was allowed to eat that with their family or friends or servants in celebration of some answer to prayer or something that God had done for them. The burnt offering, however, was an entirely different type of offering. It was an offering that had an atonement aspect to it. It was related to sin but it was also an offering that expressed complete devotion to God and when the skin was removed from the animal the entire animal was offered; it was completely burned.

So that helps us to make sense out of what the Lord is saying. “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat the flesh.” The Lord is saying, “Look, you might as well eat your burnt offerings rather than offering them to me because without the lifestyle behind them those burnt offerings mean absolutely nothing. They do not provide atonement for your sin. They do not express your devotion to me. If you want to express devotion to me then reflect it by your lifestyle.” So that’s the significance to “add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat the flesh.”

Then the Lord also says something in verse 22 that in the sense as we look at this we’re not sure what the Lord actually means here. In verse 22: “For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.” What does the Lord mean when he says, “I didn’t speak to your father’s about burnt offerings and sacrifices”? Well, I think he did. I can go back to Exodus and other parts where the Lord did speak to them; they were supposed to offer these things. I think the NIV
has helped us out here by giving us the sense of what this verse is saying. They add a word here to clarify: “I did not just speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.” In a rhetorical way the Lord is saying, “Look, I didn’t even talk to you about offerings and sacrifices.” That is an extreme hyperbolic statement. “I didn’t even talk to you about that,” is a way of saying compared to the standards of justice and the ways that I wanted you to live and behave, the sacrifices and rituals were secondary to that.” Really in a sense the Lord is saying to Israel exactly the same thing that Samuel said to Saul, “to obey is better than to sacrifice.”

The prophets were not repudiating the sacrifices, the rituals, the offerings, and the holy days. Those things were important. They were part of obedience to God; but in this temple sermon those rituals are not enough. What needs to happen is that Judea needs to obey my voice I will be your guide, and you shall be my people. Walk in the way that I command you that it may be well with you.

The sad thing we realize is that as we come to the end of this Temple Sermon, God knows the way that his people are going to respond. God in a sense has offered them a very valid opportunity: the chance to repent and avoid punishment. It’s a legitimate offer, but the Lord says this about his people at the end of the message, “From the day that my servants, the prophets spoke to them day after day yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. So Jeremiah, speak all of these words to them but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them but they will not answer to you and you shall say to them, ‘this is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God and did not accept discipline. Truth has perished. It is cut off from their lips they will not listen to God’s word.’”

So exactly the same things that we’ve already seen in chapter 2 and chapter 3, return to the Lord, return to the Lord, but they would not return. Chapter 7: “Amend your ways and the Lord will allow you to live here.” In a sense I believe that Jeremiah 7 is one of those hinge moments. It’s a watershed moment. They had
an opportunity to respond before the Babylonian crisis envelops them and swallows them up. They have an opportunity to return to God but as has happened throughout Judah’s history, and has happened throughout the ministry of Jeremiah, they would not listen, they would not respond, they would not amend their ways, they would not shuv, and turn back to the Lord.

Transcribed by Elizabeth Berube, Thor Rasmussen, Ian Bleecker, David Giordano, Amanda Farinacci, Dane Vandenberg and edited by Andrew Ware
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Review

Our session today is going to focus on Jeremiah 8-10, and I’ve labeled this section “The Destruction of an Idol Worshipping People.” It is about the coming destruction that God is going to bring on the people for the worship of idols and the refusal to turn away from that. Let’s remind ourselves of where we are in the book of Jeremiah, and again these are not just a random collection of messages, there’s an order, there’s a progression, and even sometimes what looks like chaos to us, as Louis Stuhlman reminds us, there is an order there.

At the very beginning of Jeremiah, in the opening messages of the book in chapter 2, verse 1 to chapter 4, verse 4, remember that God gives a call for his unfaithful wife to return to him. They’ve committed adultery he indicts them for that in chapter 2. But then, in chapter 3, and the early portions of chapter 4, there are these recurring calls for the people to return. God is still willing to take these people back in spite of their unfaithfulness. Then in the next section, in the remainder of chapter 4 all the way to the end of chapter 6, we have a series of poetic oracles. The Lord is warning them of the army, the coming invasion, the coming judgment that God is going to bring against them because they are not willing to return [shuv]. The Lord has given them the opportunity to return but Jeremiah’s messages are acknowledging that that return is not likely. Chapter 5, verse 22 of that section talks about their rebellious hearts. It says in verse 23, “My people have a stubborn and rebellious heart. They have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts let us fear the Lord our God.”

So there’s an opportunity to return in Jer. 2:1-4:4, but an acknowledgement in chapters 4-6 that that’s not likely to happen. As a result of that, the cause and effect is that God is going to bring judgment against them. He’s going to send in
this enemy army. Chapter 4-6 is followed by a prose sermon that I think in many ways ties together the poetry by various images that come out at us. There’s the Temple Sermon where Jeremiah begins again with a call that if they will amend their way, if they will change their behavior, then God will relent from sending the judgment. There’s the possibility of repentance, but by the end of the sermon, the tone of the message has turned from the possibility of judgment to the reality that the people are not going to return and again the issue is that the people have a heart problem. They need heart surgery, they’re unwilling to do that on themselves, God is ultimately going to have to do that for them.

Chapter 7, verse 24 says this, at the end of the message, “But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own councils and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and they went backward and not forward.” So that has characterized the history of Israel and Judah. As Jeremiah ministers to the people and preaches the word as he gives them the opportunity to return, that’s not going to change. The Lord says to him at the conclusion of this message, “so you shall speak all of these words to them, but they will not listen to you.” The problem was not with the message. The problem was not with the clarity of the message. The problem was not with the rhetoric of the message, we saw in our last session how effectively the prophet convinces them of their need to change and the things that he does that make that temple sermon powerful; but they have a heart problem that makes it impossible for them to repent.

Jer 8-10 Oracles of Judgment

After Chapter 7, we move into the section of chapters 8-10 where again we have a series of poetic oracles and messages that are focusing on the judgment that is coming again because the people have a heart problem and they refuse to return. They refuse to relent. They refuse to turn away from their sin, and the prophet addresses this issue at the very beginning of the section in chapter 8, verses 4-6. We’re basically seeing there the continuation of what’s been going on in chapters 4-7. In Verse 4, the Lord says to the prophet, “You shall say to them, ‘Thus says
the Lord: When men fall, do they not rise again?’” If someone falls down, the natural tendency is for them to stand back up. “‘If one turns away, does he not return?’” If someone goes away on a trip away from their house, the normal thing is it is going to be a two way journey where they return. There we have our key theological word shuv again. But Israel and Judah have not returned to the Lord. Verse 5: “‘Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding?’” The Lord is calling on them to shuv but they have repeatedly shuv-ed or turned away from him. “‘They hold fast to their deceit, they refuse to return, I have paid attention and listened but they have not spoken rightly. No man relents of his evil saying, ‘What have I done?’” And so the Lord is expecting them to return from their sin, to turn away from their evil ways. They won’t do that because the issue is, again, they have a heart problem.

Addressing the Heart Problem

In chapter 9, verses 25 and 26 is going to address this heart problem that Israel has, or that Judah has, that keeps them from turning to the Lord. Remember in chapter 4, the call was “circumcise your heart,” cut away the foreskin, the skin that’s causing you to repeat your sin and to stay hardened in your heart against the Lord. Verses 25 and 26 describe their heart in this way: “‘Behold, the days are coming’, declares the Lord, ‘when I will punish all of those who are circumcised merely in the flesh. Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all of these nations are all uncircumcised.’” And so the Lord includes Judah among all of the uncircumcised nations that live around them. Their practice of physical circumcision doesn’t make them distinctive in God’s eyes. What would really make them distinctive is if they circumcised their heart, if they cut away the evil in their hearts that were keeping them from listening to God, but Judah has a heart problem.

The prophet uses a different image to describe that in chapter 17, verse 1, it says, “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron and with a point of diamond. It is engraved on the tablet of their heart and on the horns of their altar.” So the
prophet imagines one of the iron tools that were used to inscribe writing on stone. This was often done because of inscriptions. He says in the same way that an iron stylist is used to inscribe on a stone, the sin of Israel is deeply etched on their heart. The sin of Judah is deeply etched into their character and so they are unable to turn away from this. They have a heart problem, and then the prophet gives us this description of the human heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand how wicked it really is?”

So there’s a problem in chapters 2-10 that is going to work its way through the entire book. God is calling his people to return back to him. They refuse to do that and the issue is they have a heart problem. Coming all the way to the point in chapter 7 where the Lord says their sin is deeply etched into their heart, their character they cannot turn. So the promise in Jeremiah is that ultimately what God is going to have to do is to perform heart surgery on the people of Israel.

Promise of a New Heart

When we study the new covenant later in the book of Jeremiah, in the second half of our lectures on this, we’re going to look at a series of passages in chapter 24, verse 7, chapter 29, verses 11-14, the promise of the New Covenant in chapter 31-33 and then following up on that a recurring, repeated promise in chapter 32, verse 39-41, that what God is going to do for Israel in the restoration - when God establishes this new covenant - what he’s going to do is that he’s going to give Israel a new heart.

Chapter 31, verse 33 says the Lord is going to write his torah on the heart of the people so that they have the internal desire, ability, enablement, and divine empowerment to turn to him and to live the kind of lives that he wants them to live. At this point, what is etched on their hearts, is their deep-seated sin and their rebellion against God. God is going to erase that, and the new covenant is going to provide an enablement. Chapter 32 says they will be enabled to obey God, they will fear him, they will follow his commandments. So part of the strategy and plot
of the book of Jeremiah is: in the early parts of the book we see the sin of Israel, we see their corrupt heart, we see their sin that is written and deeply etched into their character. God, in his work of judgment, first of all, is going to purge that sin away and then as he restores the people, God is going to give them a new heart. He is going to transform them from the inside out by doing a work of salvation that’s even greater than what God has done for them in the past. The book of Jeremiah is about the heart problem and how God is going to fix that and remedy that. That is one of the key things that works itself throughout the book.

Idolatry

Now what exactly was it about Judah’s heart that made them so unwilling to turn to the Lord? I think what we see in chapters 8 to 10, is that the thing that has made them so rebellious, the reason they have not circumcised their hearts is that they have hearts that are devoted to the worship of idols. “They have idol worshipping hearts.” I’ve used this quote a couple of times, but Calvin reminds us that our hearts are “idol factories.” That’s really the issue with Israel and Judah’s hearts in the book of Jeremiah.

We see the specific connection between a hard heart and idolatry in chapter 9, verse 14. Chapter 9, verse 14 says this: “They have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals, just as their fathers have taught them.” This has characterized, the history of the people of Israel and Judah. They have followed their evil hearts because they have a desire to worship, to follow, to serve the gods of the nations. Remember that the Lord had set up Israel to be his missionary people. As they lived in the midst of the pagan cultures around them, and the Lord in many ways by putting them in Syro-Palestine, at this place between two different major land areas, the Lord was setting them up on main street to be a witness to these nations. They were to show these nations what the true God looked like by keeping the Law and by following the Law, and then experiencing God’s blessings.
The book of Deuteronomy says that the people around them would say, “What kind of God does Israel have that would give them this kind of great and glorious Law? What kind of people has a God that speaks to them in this way? What kind of people has a God who blesses them with all these things that are in this promised land, and in this land of milk and honey? We want to know this God.” And so it was designed that as Israel lived on main street in the midst of these pagan people, that they would come to Israel and they would learn about God and they would follow him and they would love him and want to serve him.

What ended up happening is that the Old Testament history is primarily the reverse of that. Israel learns the ways of the nations. They learn about the gods that the nations follow. They turn away from the fountain of living waters, and they give their hearts to broken cisterns. They have idol worshipping hearts.

The warning in chapters 8 to 10, just as it’s been in chapters 4 to 6, just as its been in chapter 7, in the Temple Sermon, is that as a result of this God is about to bring an enemy army. And this enemy army, that is going to invade the land, this is going to be the covenant curse that God is going to bring on Israel for their worship of idols. This is going to be the judgment that’s the direct result of this. Just like in chapters 4 to 6, there’s a cause and effect. Their continued willingness or their unwillingness to turn from their sin and to turn back to God is going to bring the covenant curse of an enemy army. Just like in chapter 7, “if you repent, I’ll allow you to live in this place, if you do not turn away from your sin, if you do not repent, then I’m going to do to Jerusalem exactly what I did to Shiloh.” So there are more warnings in chapters 8-10 of the judgment that God is going to bring because of their idol worshipping hearts.

Description of the Disaster

We have another description of the prophet portraying for us the coming invasion, the siege, and the horrors of that and what Judah is going to experience. If they can see how bad this is going to be, maybe they will be motivated to change their ways. So, the prophet describes the people, after the enemy has come,
and after the army has invaded the land, and here’s the picture that we have of this in chapter 8, verses 14-17. The people say this, and they’ve just lived through the horrors of war, “Why do we sit still? Gather together, let us go into the fortified cities and perish there.” We don’t really have an option, let’s just go perish. “For the Lord our God has doomed us to perish and has given us poisoned water to drink because we have sinned against the Lord. We looked for peace, but no good came. For a time of healing, but behold, all that we have experienced is terror.”

Then Jeremiah portrays for them what it’s going to be like as this army is coming through their land. In verse 16, “the snorting of their horses is heard from Dan,” in the northern part of the land, “at the sound of the neighing of their stallions, the whole land quakes,” it’s shaking, “they come and devour the land and all that fills it, the city, and all of those that dwell in it. For behold, I am sending among you serpents, adders, that cannot be charmed and they will bite you,’ declares the Lord.” God is going to release poisoned snakes throughout the land and again, all of it is because of the fact that there have been these calls for Judah to return, but they can’t and they won’t, because their stubborn hearts that are devoted to idolatry.

**Enemy Invasion**

There’s another picture of the enemy invasion of the siege of the punishment, that’s going to come to Judah because of that, because of this rebellion. We see that in chapter 9, verses 21-22. Listen to the portrayal that the prophet gives us here. He says, “Death has come up into our windows; it has entered our palaces, cutting off the children from the streets, and the young men from the squares. Speak: ‘Thus declares the Lord, The dead bodies of men shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves after the reaper, and none will gather them.’”

So, in this passage, it’s not just an army that’s invading their land, in the same way that we portray death as the Grim Reaper, and we personify it. They personify death as in Canaanite religion, Mot was the god of death. It’s as if Mot is
fighting with the enemy that’s invading the land. Death is climbing into the windows. It’s claiming the lives of their children. You can’t escape it. It’s even climbing into the palaces and taking the sons of the king.

They are going to be dead bodies scattered like dung all throughout the land. Now, we think if this was the description of judgment that the prophet was giving to us, obviously, this would make us change; this would make us repent. Surely, of all the things that the people could hear this would convince them that they need to change their ways, but this reflects for us the depth of their heart problem. They are so devoted to idols, they are so devoted to sinful ways, that even these kinds of warnings can’t turn them away from the sinful patterns that have reflected their past life.

Siege Description

We have a passage in the historical books in II Kings chapter 6 that I think remind us and portrays for us just how horrible siege can really be, and just how terrible the circumstances are going to be for Judah when this enemy army invades. In II King chapter 6, we have a story of the siege of Samaria, the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Arameans, their enemies. Ben-Hadad brings his army and they basically have the city of Samaria locked down. What would happen is that your food supply and your water supply were ultimately cut off. As the days and months progress eventually, you run out of food, you run out water, and you simply have to surrender or to be destroyed.

The famine in II King 6 is so severe that it says, “a donkey head is selling for 80 shekels of sliver,” which is something like 7 or 8 years’ worth of wages for the average worker. A fourth of a liter of dove dung is so valuable that it would cost 6 months of wages—5 shekels of sliver. There is even a story of two women in that passage where they have agreed to kill their children and eat them. One of the women has done that and the other one has hidden their child, and they come to the king and with their dispute about that. That’s how serious siege can be. That’s what Jeremiah’s describing those kinds of conditions where there would be
starvation and famine, a lack of water, and cannibalism, and terrible suffering and then death itself as the enemy takes the city. Those are the kinds of things that Jeremiah is prophesying about.

As we turn over to Jeremiah chapter 39, and Jeremiah 52, that tell the story of the capture of the city of Jerusalem, that’s exactly what Jerusalem is going to experience in its final days. But as the prophet is warning them, they can't respond even to those kinds of warnings. Even that’s not enough to really grip their sinful hearts, because they are devoted to idolatry.

Joel as a Model of a Shuv Response

Now I think we have an idea of the kind of reaction, the kind of response that God was desiring from his people as the prophet is warning them about the judgment that’s going to come, from one of the minor prophets, from the book of Joel. I’d like to look for just a minute or two at Joel chapter 2, to contrast the response that the people had to the message of Joel, with the response that the people of Judah had to the preaching of Jeremiah. There’s a dispute or debate about the date of the book of Joel, the most likely setting though, seems to be the post-exilic period. Amazingly even after the exiled, all of the judgment that Judah has experienced, they have not really returned to God. They’ve come back to the land, but the change in geography has not really changed their hearts. So they have experienced more judgment and more covenant curses as they come back to the land. Joel writes after the time when a locust-swarm has gone through the land and devastated their crops. Joel says that wasn’t just an accident of nature, it was the judgment of God. And he also says, that locust invasion is a warning of the fact that God is about to send another enemy invasion into the land; and this time it’s not going to be locust, it’s going to be an enemy army. So he is threatening the people in the post-exilic period with the same kind of judgment, the same kind of siege that Jeremiah is warning the people of in the days before the fall of Jerusalem; and the difference is that as Joel preaches this message, the people respond in the way that God designed for the people to respond in Jeremiah’s day.
So the prophet in Joel says this: “Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all of your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning, and rend your hearts not your garments. Return to the Lord your God.’” Joel is saying exactly the same thing that Jeremiah says. Turn to God! Return! Shuv! If you will make a U-turn in your life, that’s what the Lord desires.

It’s not enough just to go through the rituals of fasting or tearing your garments, or prayer service. Rend your heart. Circumcise your heart. Truly come back to God, and let your fasting, weeping and mourning be a reflection of your true repentance for your sin. Joel says here’s the reason why: “For the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster.” God, actually, when people respond to his warnings of judgment, he changes his mind and may not sent the judgment. Jeremiah is offering that valid opportunity to the people in his day as well. You may avoid this judgment and this invasion if you’ll just turn to the Lord. Verse 14, “Who knows whether the Lord will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God.” Who knows, if you turn back to God, there’s always the possibility that God may relent and bless you with food and drink, in the same way that he’s used the locust to take it away.

And then he says this: “Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, consecrate the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, even nursing infants, let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.” Let’s all come together. Bring everyone, bring the children, bring someone on their honeymoon, let’s all gather together, let’s turn back to the Lord, and maybe God will relent and not send this judgment.

When we stop at the end of verse 17 in Joel chapter 2, there’s been this call to repent. We get the idea in the verses that follow that the people have responded to this call. They have proclaimed the assembly, they have fasted, they have torn their garments, they have returned to the Lord, because here’s what we read in verse 18:
Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on this people. The Lord answered and said to his people, ‘Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine and oil and you will be satisfied; and I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations. I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his vanguard into the eastern sea, and the rear guard into the western sea; the stench and foul of him will rise, for he has done great things.

The Lord stops the judgment in the middle of it, turns the enemy army away and promises to the people of Judah, “I’m going to send blessing instead of judgment.” He goes on and says in verse 24: “The threshing floor shall be full of grain and the vat shall overflow with wine and oil. I will even restore to you the ears that the locust has eaten.” So God not only relents from sending judgment, he takes away the effect of the judgment that is already come. In the midst of this unfolding judgment, God stops, and relents from sending it. What the Lord wants to do in Jeremiah is exactly the same thing.

If the people will somehow respond to him, and in Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 8 listen to this and see if it doesn’t sound exactly like what God is asking the people to do in Joel’s day. In chapter 4, verse 8, it says: “for this put on sackcloth, lament and wail for the fierce anger of the Lord has not turned back from us.” So in Joel’s day we have an example of how a prophet warned of a judgment that was coming. He told the people to lament, to grieve, to turn from their sin, to rend their hearts, not just to go through their rituals, and in the midst of that unfolding judgment, when the locust had already come, when the army was sharpening its
weapons and getting ready to go into battle, when the people turned back to God, God relented from sending the judgment.

Impediments to Turning

In Jeremiah chapters 8-10, the Lord is giving those same kinds of calls; he’s providing that same kind of opportunity. He’s warning them of the judgment that’s coming. But the problem is Judah has a heart problem. They have a heart that’s devoted to idols and because of that they can’t turn away from their sin, therefore God is going to send judgment, and God is going to destroy this idol worshiping people.

We saw on chapter 9, verse 14 that idolatry is the problem and the issue that is keeping Judah from turning to God. So what we have in chapter 10 is a passage that is going to focus on the futility of idolatry. A passage that is going to directly address the issue that is keeping Judah from turning back to God and to becoming the people that he wants them to be. So in Chapter 10:1-5, the prophet simply reminds us of the futility of idolatry and here’s how he describe this, in verse 3, he says, “The customs, [the pagan’s practices] of the people are vanity,” they’re hevel, and that’s one of the words that is used in the Old Testament to describe idols, their just wind, they cannot help you, they’re just a vapor. “A tree from the forest is cut down and is worked with an ax by the hands of a craftsman, they decorate it with silver and gold, they fasten it with hammer and nails, so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, they cannot speak, they have to be carried, they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them for they cannot do evil and they cannot do good.” Idols cannot help you.

Folly of Idolatry

Now, the prophet here in a sense is engaging in some rather biting sarcasm. Idol worshippers in the ancient near east were sophisticated enough to understand that the idol itself was not their god. There was a distinction between the god and the idol that represented it. But there was a very real sense that the presence of their gods were associated with the image itself, there was a consecration
ceremony called “the opening of the mouth” or “the washing of the mouth” of the idol where in a sense that image became consecrated to the god and the presence of the god became associated with the idol itself. But the fact that this god is represented by a lifeless object -- I mean the idol worshiper has to make the image -- to Jeremiah this reminds him of the futility of trusting in the gods that these idols represent.

The prophet Isaiah engages in the same kind of sarcasm over in Isaiah 44 and 47, where he talks about the futility of idolatry. He says, “Imagine this, a man cuts down a log off a tree with half of it he burns it in a fire to cook his dinner, the other half of it he shapes and forms it into an idol.” That reflects the futility of idolatry. Jeremiah says, think about all the things that an idol can’t do: it can’t speak; it can’t walk; in fact, they have to nail it do a pedestal to make sure that it doesn’t fall over; they can’t do evil; and they can’t do good. Why would anyone want to worship a god that is represented by that? Now there are places in the Old Testament where I believe that the Bible is going to acknowledge that there are spiritual forces that are spiritual beings that are associated with the idols. But here the idea is simply they’re absolutely nothing. Even if they are spiritual forces that are represented by these idols compared to the Lord who is the eternal creator, self-existent God, these idols, these gods that are represented by them, are nothing.

In the next section, verses 6-10 in chapter 10: “The Lord alone is God.” Verse 6-10, “There is none like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you. They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood.” Verse 10, “But the Lord is the true God; he is the living and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.” The Lord alone is the sovereign Lord over the earth. Even if these idols do represent gods, they are not gods like the Lord. They are not eternal, they are not creators, and they are not self-existent. They do not have the sovereignty to control history the
way that the Lord does, and that’s the point that Isaiah makes as well. In fact the description that fits the idols is that they are stupid and foolish.

The final point that the prophet is going to make about idols in this sermon in verses 1-5 is: idols are futile and unable to do anything. Verses 6-10: “the Lord alone is God, the Lord alone is sovereign. He is the true Lord and the only one.” In verses 11-15 the proof of that is that the Lord alone is the creator, he is the creator God. Israel believed in creational monotheism. There was no one like the Lord, regardless of what other spiritual beings and powers might be out there, the Lord alone is the creator, self-existing God. So, verses 11-15 said this: “the gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens. It is he; it is the Lord who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding, stretched out the heavens.” The Lord alone is the only one that Israel needs to worship, the only one that Israel needs to give honor and glory to, the one that Israel needs to exclusively trust for their blessing, protection and security -- because the Lord alone is the creator. Now there is an important connection here that we need to understand in verses 11-15 to really grasp the theology of idolatry in the Old Testament. Remember in verses 1-5 all the things that an idol can’t do: an idol can’t speak, an idol can’t move, and idol can’t do good, and an idol can’t do evil. It’s impudent.

Just like Elijah says to the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel “Where’s your god? Surely he can answer,” in a sarcastic way, “he’s not there.” In the second section the Lord alone is God and the description that’s given of idols there, idols are stupid and foolish. Listen to what he says about idol worshipers in verses 14 and 15, “Every man is stupid and without knowledge, every gold smith is put to shame by his idols. For his images are false and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion.” Here’s Jeremiah’s theological punch line. Idols are stupid and foolish; therefore so are the people that worship them.
We Become Like What We Worship

And G. K. Beale and his book on idolatry and the theology of that makes
this point: we become what we worship. The way that God judges idolatry in the
Old Testament is that those who worship these empty foolish gods become like
them. In Exodus chapter 32 when Israel bows down and worships the golden calf,
the description of them that is given at least four separate times in the verses that
follow is that they have become stiff necked rebels. What Beale reminds us there
is that what that really means is that Moses is using stubborn cow imagery to
describe the people. They worshipped a golden calf, they became like a stubborn
cow.

Psalm 115 makes this point a little bit more explicitly. We become like
what we worship. Verse 4 says this, “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of
human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They
have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not
feel; feet, but they do not walk; and they not make a sound in their throat.” Do you
hear Jeremiah’s image of the scarecrow in the melon patch there? Here’s the point
in verse 8: “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”
That’s exactly what Jeremiah is saying here: “Look, I know it’s your idolatry; it’s
your devotion to these other gods that’s the reason that you have a stubborn heart,
that’s the reason why you refuse to turn to God. But what you need to understand
is that your worship of these idols has made you foolish and stupid. They have
dulled you spiritually because when you worship gods that can’t see, can’t hear,
can’t speak, can’t know, can’t do right or wrong, you become like them.”

So one of the themes in chapters 8-10 is that Israel has become foolish,
Judah has become foolish because of their devotion, their service and their
worship of these empty gods. Jeremiah is going to constantly come back to the
point in these chapters that Israel is lacking sense. Anyone who had any wisdom
would see the need to turn away from their idols but Judah lacks the knowledge to
do this because they worshiped gods who were stupid and foolish themselves.
Chapter 8, verse 7 says this: “Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledoves, swallow and crane keep the time of their coming.” They obey their nature and the things that God has implanted with them. They have the wisdom to do that. God has implanted that in his creation. “But my people do not know the rules of the Lord.” Really by worshipping idols, they’ve become more foolish than animals. They’re not as smart as the birds in the sky that know how to listen to God. Verse 8, “How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us’? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.” We don’t know if the scribes here were actually changing the text, but those that were given the responsibility of teaching God’s word were changing its meaning. They were blunting the message of judgment, focusing exclusively on the message of blessing, and as a result of that their wise men were foolish.

Chapter 9, verses 12-14: “Who is the man that is so wise that he can understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken that he may declare it? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness?” The wise man ought to be able to figure out why they were going through so much difficulty and the obvious answer is: we haven’t obeyed the Lord. But because we have a heart that’s devoted to idols we can’t see the obvious that should be staring us in the face.

Chapter 9, verses 23 and 24, “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches but let him who boasts boast in this: that he understands and knows me.” See, they’ve lost real knowledge because they don’t know the true God. They’ve lost the ability to discern the difference between good and evil because idols can’t do good and they can’t do evil. They’ve lost the ability to understand why God is bringing this judgment and they’ve lost the sense that they need to realize that we need to turn back to God because they’ve bought disaster on themselves. Idolatry has caused this.
Back in chapter 9, verse 3 it says: “‘They bend their tongue like a bow. Falsehood and not truth has gone wrong in the land for they proceed from evil to evil and they do not know me,’ declares the Lord.” They have turned away from the source of real knowledge that would help them to understand the difference between good and evil. Chapter 9, verse 6: “‘Heaping oppression upon oppression and deceit upon deceit, they refuse to know me,’ declares the Lord.” They’ve cut themselves off from the true source of knowledge.

Nature of Idolatry

Now I want to spend just a couple of minutes talking about the nature of idolatry, and try to apply this and make it real in our lives. Idolatry in Judah was not just about a competing theology. It was not just about “Am I a monotheist versus a polytheist?” But really idolatry involved a strategy about living life that the prophet says is absolutely foolish. Idolatry in some ways in ancient Israel, it reflects in our lives. It is about a strategy designed on how to acquire the things that we feel that we need to make life meaningful and significant. I note as I study idolatry throughout the Old Testament that it’s often connected to what some people have called the “unholy trinity”: Money, sex and power. Israel worshipped idols. They worshiped Baal as the storm god because they believed that it would bring them wealth and possessions. Hosea chapter 2, verse 5, God gives them the wine, the grain, the abundant harvest and they turn around and they give that back to Baal because they believe that Baal is the one who’s given that to them. Jeremiah chapter 44, verses 16-18, The Judeans who fled to Egypt say, “things were going well for us when we made our offerings to the queen of heaven and carried out our pagan rituals. Things started going bad when Josiah brought about these religious reforms. We’re going to go back to the old ways.”

Idolatry was connected with the practice and the acquisition of sex. The Canaanite fertility gods would bless them with children. In Judah during the time of the divided monarchy archaeologists have found hundreds of these figurines of these fertility goddesses under the houses and homes of the people of Judah. The
women worshipped these god’s because they believed that they would give them children. Along with that the worship of the fertility gods come sexual immorality and prostitution and fertility rights into the practice of worship itself. These were things that God had designed that were not to be a part of Israel’s worship. It brought sex into their lives without having to follow the moral dictates that God had laid upon them. I can imagine that if we were to promote this kind of religion in our culture today, that’s the philosophy of modern culture as well.

Idolatry is also connected to the acquisition of power. Kings in Israel desired to appropriate the powers of these gods. In 2 Kings, chapter 3, we see the king of Moab sacrificing his son on the wall during a time of battle because he wanted power from that god. The kings of Judah, Ahaz and Manasseh, did the same to their sons because they wanted the power that those gods provide.

Ahaz makes an alliance with Assyria and brings an Damascus altar to Jerusalem because that will give him power that the Lord alone does not have. Ahab marries Jezebel and makes an alliance with her father who is a Baal worshipper because the king of Tyre is a powerful political man. Jezebel promotes Baal worship because it’s a way of extending the power of the king. If a man doesn’t want to sell you his vineyard as the king, then you have the right to take it. Idols promise power. What Jeremiah and the prophets and the Lord himself wants the people to see is: this is a foolish way to live your life. You will try to acquire these things and they will become in your life an unholy trinity because you’re looking to these gods to provide them in illegitimate ways.

The reality is that if we look at the Bible and the way God has designed us as human, I don’t believe that money, sex, and power are an unholy trinity at all. Used properly and when God is the source of those things, they are gifts from God. God blessed his people with the promised land that was flowing with milk and honey. God blessed them with prosperity. God created sex to be a beautiful expression of his own love, within the relationship of marriage. God created power and made us images of God so that we could be his vice-regents and rule and
reign. So when we recognize God as the source of these things, these things can be used for good. If we recognize God as the source of our wealth, it enables us and allows us to be generous with our wealth, because we realize that God will take care of us. If we realize that God is the One who blesses us with sex and the love and the enjoyment and pleasure that comes from that, we can give our self to the other person in the context of marriage. It can become a beautiful expression of selflessness. If God is not recognized as the source of that, sex is just another way to consume ourselves on our own pleasures, to use people or whatever it takes to satisfy our own needs. Power, if used properly, can bless a society. It can facilitate other people to use their gifts and abilities. But if power does not come from God, then it becomes something that we use to oppress, to hurt and to practice violence against others.

So, idolatry is not just a wrong strategy about acquiring these things, it’s a wrong strategy about how to use them as well. In Israel as people looked to the idols to be the things that will give them what matters most in life, whether it’s money, sex, power or any of these other things, what we learn is that they become desperate and they use these things in the wrong way, because the gods that they trust are never able to provide the things that they’re really looking for. They were looking for Baal to give them wealth and prosperity. Look at the poverty and the impoverishment that Judah is about to experience because they’ve worshipped these other gods. They’re going to be absolutely destroyed as a nation. They looked to the gods to provide them sex and when the gods didn’t provide that in the way that they wanted or needed, they became desperate and they actually brought that into their worship. When they were looking to these idols to bring them power and protection and security, they learned that it wouldn’t work.

We’re given a really vivid reminder of that in chapter 8, verses 1 to 3. It reminds us there that the kings and the people of Judah had begun to worship the gods represented by the stars. They thought, “The worship of these astral deities can give us protection and power that God can’t provide.” Here’s what the Lord
says, “Did that strategy work?” “At that time,” declares the Lord, ‘the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs and they shall be spread before the sun, and the moon, and all of the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, which they have sought and worshipped. They shall not be gathered or buried. They will become like dung on the surface of the ground.” One of the worst curses that you could ever experience in the ancient Near East was not to receive a proper burial. Their bodies are going to be taken out of the graves and laid before the stars and the sun and the moon that they worshipped. Those things were not able to protect them.

So idolatry is a foolish strategy for living your life. It will teach you the wrong way to acquire the things that are most important in life, and it will teach you the wrong way to use those things because you will become desperate. Those idols will ultimately not provide what you’re really looking for. That’s what happened to the people of Israel.

Application

Making this practical and relevant into our lives today, Tim Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* reminds us of many of the wrong strategies that we use to acquire money, sex, power, or all of those kinds of things. As I was reading Keller’s book some time ago, it’s a reminder that any time we look to something other than God to provide those things in life that matter most, to provide security and significance, we’re going to become desperate, because those idols will not satisfy; they will not provide. So Keller speaks of approval idolatry: life only has meaning if I can be loved and respected; achievement idolatry; work idolatry; religious idolatry; even religion itself. There is irreligious idolatry; comfort idolatry; family idolatry; relationship idolatry, where I have to have these things in order to be blessed. That’s a wrong strategy for living your life. And ultimately,
even if you find those things, you will ultimately discover that they cannot satisfy you in the way that God does.

So when we look at the people of Judah in the days of Jeremiah, we see people that were living their lives and using the wrong strategy, trusting in the wrong things for security and significance. Keller reminds us, and I’ll close with this, that we do the same thing when we turn to anything other than God to meet the deepest needs in our hearts and life. He says this:

If you center your life and your identity on your spouse and your partner, you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. The other person’s problems will be overwhelming to you. If you center your life and your identity on your family and your children, you will try to live your life through your children, until they resent you and have no self of their own. At worst, you may abuse them when they displease you. If you center your life and your identity on your work and your career, you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst, you will lose family and friends, and if your career goes poorly, you will develop deep depression. If you center your life and identity on money and possessions, you will be eaten up by worry or jealousy about money. You will be willing to do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle, which will eventually blow up your life. If you center your life and your identity on pleasure, gratification, and comfort, you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the escape strategies by which you avoid the hardness of life. If you center your life and identity on relationships and approval, you will be constantly overly hurt by criticism and thus always losing friends. You will fear
confronting others and therefore will be a useless friend. If you center your life and your identity on a noble cause, you will divide the world into good and bad, and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies. Without them, you have no purpose. If you center your life and identity on religion and morality, you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don’t live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.

The Old Testament reminds us that when we worship idols, we become like what we worship. Anything that we turn to other than the Lord to meet the deepest needs of our lives, will never satisfy, will never provide that living water that only the true God can.

Transcribed by Rachel Chang, Cate Alspaugh, Joyce Jun, Miriam Lopes, Victoria Allison, Stephanie Powers, and edited by Bethany Nguyen.
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Introduction

This is Dr. Jerry Yates teaching the book of Jeremiah. This is session number 14, Jeremiah 11-20, Confessions of Jeremiah, Part 1: The Prayers of Jeremiah.

In our next three lessons we are going to be looking at Jeremiah 11-20, and a series of passages that are referred to as the confessions of Jeremiah, and we will talk about what those are in just a minute. I wanted to begin with just a personal comment that is not related to the lesson itself, as we begin this. As I have studied the prophets—and again thank you so much for joining us for this study—I have benefited greatly from the work and the studies of others on the prophets. I just want to use this as a way of passing it on. I want to say a word of special thanks. When I was at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. Bob Chisholm was my mentor and many of the things that I’m sharing in the lessons and in these videos are things I’ve learned from him. I want to make sure I give credit to him. I don’t always know what I’m talking about but I steal from people that do, so I just want to pass that word along.

Now we’re going to move into a section in the book of Jeremiah that has deep, personal significance to me, because we are looking more at the person of Jeremiah and in many ways what ministry is like. Jeremiah shows us what a relationship with God looks like in the context of ministry. One of the things that I appreciate about the Old Testament, and why I believe that we need the Old Testament, is that in the stories of God dealing with people in the Old Testament or in the interaction of God and people in the Psalms or in prayers like we’re going to be looking at in Jeremiah's life the principles of the New Testament that are taught to us sometimes in a very didactic way are fleshed out in real life
experiences and the reality of God as a person and how he relates to people is reflected and fleshed out for us in the Old Testament in ways that if we ignore that we miss out on a huge part how God revels himself.

Jeremiah’s Prayers

The confessions of Jeremiah are not really confessions, the term that’s used for these passages. What they really are, are prayers that Jeremiah offers to God. They are prayers that are actually Jeremiah’s words to God but they become God’s words to us as well. That’s the power of inspiration. These prayers are in fact laments like we have in the Psalms where Jeremiah is pouring out his heart to God over the pain, and the difficulty in ministry, the hardships in his life, and the opposition and persecution he has felt.

J. Andrew Dearmen has a great statement about the confessions and I wanted to read that as the beginning point. He says, “One of the marvelous gifts of Jeremiah's book is the humanness of his prayers. When wearied and depressed by the struggle with rejection and persecution; zeal for the path of discipleship, and in the case of Jeremiah, zeal to carry out his prophetic commission is no guarantee of smooth sailing in life. God will hear the prayers of his disciples just as he heard Jeremiah's prayers and cries to God.” So if you have ever been wearied by rejection, depressed, felt opposition and persecution in ministry (and I think all of us have), then these are prayers that you are going to resonate with.

These prayers are unique among the prophets in some sense because Jeremiah, more than any book, is going to give us insight into the struggles that Jeremiah had in fulfilling the commission and calling that God had given to him. These prayers reflect what we could describe as raw emotion and there are places when I read them and I wonder, “Is this something you really can say to God?” “Could I say this to God myself and not be zapped by a lightening bolt?” “Does God allow you to say this?” These prayers and these confessions as they are referred to are found in six different passages: They are found in 11:18-23, 12:1-6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:19-23, and 20:7-18. So as we look at Jeremiah 11-20, these
prayers weave themselves throughout the messages and oracles that are there. They are very important to this part of the book of Jeremiah. Now look at these and ask the question: “Are these really things you can say to God?” I want to read a couple of them and give us a sampling of what these are like.

Prayer in Jeremiah 15

First of all, in Jeremiah chapter 15, I’m going to read the lament that is expressed there. We are going to read verses 10-18 of that lament. Jeremiah says, “Woe is me, my mother, that you gave birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends. I have not lent nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me.” So he says, “woe is me,” so this is not exactly rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice. Can you say this to God? “I am the source of contention in the whole land; I have simply tried to be faithful to God and I have experienced all kinds of abuse and hardship because of that.” The Lord said, “Have I not set you free for their good? Have I not pleaded for you before the enemy and the time of trouble and in the time of distress? Can one break iron from the north and bronze?” The Lord says to the people of Israel, “Your wealth and your treasures I will give a spoil without price for all of your sins throughout all of your territories. I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know. For in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever.” That message about “God's fire is going to kindle and burn forever,” is the message that has gotten Jeremiah into so much trouble. Jeremiah says in verse 15, “O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you have filled me with indignation.” Jeremiah says, “Look, Lord, I want to remind you of some things. The difficulties that I’m experiencing are because I delighted in your words I ingested them, I took them into my soul, they became a part of me;
they became a part of my living expression. I have not sat in the company of the partygoers. I have been faithful to you God. And in the midst of that I have suffered incredible opposition and persecution. Why Lord?"

Jeremiah chapter 15 verse 18, and this may be one of the most shocking statements in all of the book, Jeremiah says, “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” Again this doesn’t sound like “rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.” Then Jeremiah asks a question. “Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” Can you get to a place where you really say that to God? Jeremiah here is picturing one of the wadis in Judea that in a storm could quickly fill with water, but at other times when the weather became hot and dry, that water would be completely missing. He says, “God you have been like one of those wadis out in the desert during the hot summer months. There is no water there.” That image and that metaphor is especially significant to me when I think back to Jeremiah 2:13. “My people have abandoned the source of living water and have hewed out for themselves broken cisterns.” Jeremiah, in that passage, says Judah is dry, parched and thirsty because the gods that they have trusted in are broken cisterns. The life, joy, blessing, security and significance that they thought those gods were going to provide for them, there’s no water there! The Lord is the source of living water.

In this passage the Lord Himself has become, not a broken cistern, but a deceitful brook. And there’s no water there and Jeremiah says “Well, you are like the waters that fail.”

Prayer in Jeremiah 18

This is a very good representative example of the types of things we see in Jeremiah’s laments. Another one is found in chapter 18, this is a shorter one so I want to read this one and give us another sampling of this. Listen to the prayer that Jeremiah prays in chapter 18, verses 19-23. “Hear me, O Lord, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn
away your wrath from them.” Lord, again, I’m simply doing what God has told me to do. I’ve tried to warn them so they might chose and turn away from their sin. “Therefore,” now here’s where the prayer gets difficult in light of the fact that they have not listened, “Therefore, deliver up their children to famine; give them over to the power of the sword; let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be struck down by swords in battle. May a cry be heard from their houses, when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them! For they have dug a pit to take me and laid snares for my feet. Yet you, O Lord, know all they are plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you, deal with them in the time of your anger.”

It’s as if he is saying, “Lord bring your wrath and vengeance, and Lord don’t just judge them, judge their families. And may their children experience this, and may their families experience the hardships that come about as the consequences of their sin.” What happened to “Pray for those who hate you and love them, love your enemies and be like your father in heaven”? What about, “The lord doesn’t take delight in the death of the wicked,” that’s an Old Testament passage. Are these the kinds of prayers that a righteous person can pray? And as we work through Jeremiah with students sometimes, they ask: are these prayers good prayers or bad prayers? Was Jeremiah in the will of God or was Jeremiah outside the will of God when he’s praying these kinds of things about his enemies? As we’re working through these and just trying to provide a basic framework for understanding them in this lesson, I’m going to try to make the argument that I believe that these are very much righteous prayers. I think in one sense, they reflect in the very beginning, the absolute freedom that we have in prayer with access that has been given to us by Christ. We have absolute freedom to come to God and be honest with Him.

Psalm 62:8 says that you are to pour out your heart to God; that’s what prayer is. And the image that’s used there in Psalm 68, is a container filled with
water, someone emptying that out, perhaps as a drink offering to the Lord. We can do the same thing with what is in our hearts. We can bring it to God and pour it out to Him. That doesn’t just mean our prayers and praises and happy thoughts. It also means sometimes our negative thoughts, our anger, those kinds of things, absolute honesty in our prayers. Pour out your heart before God.

Nature of Lament

I think about that verse and I think about the men who went behind the enemy lines to get David water and when David heard what they had done, he pours that water out on the ground and says, “If I were to drink that it would be like drinking blood.” We can empty the contents of our heart before God and God allows us to come there with freedom to express that.

I think we need these prayers. I think we need to spend time in these prayers so that we understand that “rejoicing in the Lord always” is not just the idea of being a happy Christian or that the Christian life is simply a façade. We put on this plastic image—whether we feel like it or not we are going to rejoice in the Lord, we are going to put a smile on our face, and we are going to be happy. I do not think that is really what rejoicing in the Lord is about. Someone has said we know very well how to worship in the major keys. The Old Testament, the Psalms, Jeremiah’s prayers in many ways, give us the freedom to also worship God in the minor keys. As we look at contemporary worship much of it is based on the major keys. Worship is about joy and celebration. Many times we go to church and it is like a pep rally. Rejoice in the Lord, be happy, be joyful. There’s a great joy that the Lord gives to us, but we need to learn to worship the Lord in the minor keys as well as the major ones.

How do we worship God after a time of personal or community wide or even national disaster? One of the closest experiences that I’ve ever had to this was at a church meeting or a prayer meeting we had in our community immediately after 9/11. It was not a time to simply sing praise songs, it was a time to come to God and grieve over thousands of people that had lost their lives and
what had happened to our nation. That’s the emotion that’s going on in Jeremiah’s life as he’s dealing with the struggles and difficulties of ministry. Jeremiah in the Old Testament and the Psalms particularly, remind us we have the freedom to come to God in that way.

Frederico Villanueva tells this story: He says in a ministry conference in the Philippines there was a fire in a hotel. There were seventy people that died in the fire, and a hundred people were injured. What made that especially tragic for the church is that most of the guests at the hotel at that time were pastors and Christian workers that were at a conference being sponsored by an American evangelical group teaching them and training them how to do ministry. Frederico said that a friend of his died. This man was a man who loved God, who was involved in ministry, who had a wife and three small children. So you can imagine the devastation that the people experienced. It was God’s people, it was believers, it was Christians that went through that. One of the pastors who had come down and observed what had happened in the fire and the responses of the family members, commented to Frederico and he criticized them in a way and said, “The people who lost loved ones here are acting like they are not Christians. They are weeping and agonizing like they have no God.” Frederico said that he came to an understanding that in the Old Testament, as we look at the laments of the Psalms and as we look at the laments of Jeremiah, we have the freedom to cry to God. That’s the reaction we’re supposed to have as we go through in these types of tragedies and disasters!

I remember one time just in a personal example of interacting with a woman at a hospital after she had lost her husband. A friend of mine was there who was a man in our church. She had just lost her husband, she was a believer, she knew the Lord, her husband was a believer who knew the Lord. I remember my friend saying to her, “It’s a great thing as believers that we know the Lord and you don’t have to grieve as a believer.” That was absolutely the wrong thing to
say. We have this hope as believers, and it was the truth in some respect, but it was the wrong time to say that. She needed to be able to grieve.

In my own life, I go back to April 2nd 1978. I was 17 years old. I came to church one Sunday night and before the service started I learned that my best friend in the youth group had been killed in a motorcycle accident. There were a group of us that went outside and we were just sitting there. We weren't verbalizing, it was hard to talk. But I can remember sitting in the dark, the sky was filled with stars and I'm at church and we've just lost our friend. I remember the verse, "The skies declare your handiwork." And all these stars were there but what was in my mind was, "God, instead of the stars, why not show your face? And why not explain to us why this happened?" In the aftermath of all that I later realized that may not have been the most brilliant theological moment in my life, but there were times I felt guilty that I'd asked God those kinds of questions. We need the laments, we need the confessions of Jeremiah because they give us the freedom to ask God those kinds of questions. But we want to make sure we do it in a way that's honoring to God as well. I think Jeremiah becomes a model to us. So the question that my students ask often: "Is this how we're supposed to pray? Is this a model of prayer?" I believe that it is and I am going to give us some reasons why as we put this in a context of theology of prayer in the Old Testament and in the New Testament as well.

Theology of Arguing with God

First of all, let me remind you of one thing. In the Old Testament, we have a long history of people who argue with God. That sounds theologically off key, but there's a long history of people arguing with God. One of my favorite examples is Abraham in Genesis chapter 18. God announces to him, "I'm going to destroy the city of Sodom." The Lord announces His intentions and Abraham begins to pray. Abraham begins to argue with God, "Lord, would you destroy the righteous along with the wicked? Would you save the city if there are 50 righteous people there?" And The Lord doesn't tell Abraham, "Abraham, I've told you what
I'm going to do, stop arguing with me." God agrees to his request. Abraham continues to negotiate and he works it down to 45 and then the numbers go to 40 or 30 or 20, finally down to 10! I wonder about what if Abraham had continued to negotiate. There's a long history of people arguing with God.

Moses, when the Lord says after the golden calf or after the people have listened to the report of the spies. "Stand back, Moses, I'm going to destroy these people and start over with you." In some ways that may have seemed like an attractive after but Moses said, "God, what about the Egyptians? They're going to hear that you destroyed your people! Lord, what are you doing here?" And it says as a result of Moses' prayer that God changes his mind. Moses effectively argued with God.

The prophet Habakkuk, who is a contemporary of Jeremiah, is dealing with the Babylonian crisis. We have to understand that the Babylonian crisis in many ways turned Israel's theology upside down. The book of Habakkuk is very similar to Jeremiah in the sense that the small tiny prophetic book is basically an argument between God and the prophet. The prophet Habakkuk comes to God in the beginning of the book and he expresses a statement to God. He says, "Lord, have you noticed the wickedness that's in the land? Lord, if you haven't, or in case you haven't noticed, I have! And Lord how long until you do something about the wickedness in the land? It's tough being a righteous person here!" The Lord comes back to Habakkuk with an answer and he says, "Habakkuk, I am going to do something about that. I'm sending the Babylonians to judge the wickedness and the sinfulness of my people." So, there's stage one of the argument.

Habakkuk thinks about God's response and there's part of that that's troubling to him as well. "Okay, Lord, if that's..." Let me give you part two here. "How can you use the Babylonians to judge us when the Babylonians are worse than we are?" God comes back to Habakkuk and says, "Habakkuk, after I have judged my people I am going to judge Babylon. And I will bring down my judgment on them because they are a city that is built on blood." In the midst of
that discussion, the Lord never says to Habakkuk, "Habakkuk, look I've told you what I'm going to do, be quiet. Stop, don't ask these questions." The Lord brings him through this process, and the purpose of this was not Habakkuk expressing his lack of faith in God. It was actually Habakkuk wrestling through his faith with God. He comes to the point at the end of the chapter where we have one of the most beautiful expressions of faith in all the Bible: "Lord, even if you take away everything, there's no animals in the stalls, there's no crops in the fields, there's no grapes on the vines, there's no olives on the trees, I'll trust you.” If he had not been able to argue with God and work through this, Habakkuk may have never come to that point. So there's a long history of arguing with God.

I'm a huge baseball fan, I've already mentioned that a couple of times and I apologize for that. But one of the things I love about baseball is that baseball gives coaches and managers the opportunity to argue with the officials in ways that are not true in other sports. You can come out in baseball and you can make your case to the umpire. Now I'm really disappointed as a little league coach I never got to do that because my son would say, "Look, dad, you're just, you're embarrassing me please don't do this." But one of the rights of a coach or a manager in baseball is to come out and argue with the umpire. However, there are parameters and guidelines for how to properly argue. If you turn your hat backwards, get in the umpire's face, spit tobacco juice in his face, question his integrity, call him certain names, you've stepped over the line. I believe in the Bible there is a proper way as we come to God in faith and if we are really trying to know God and God's will and God's way, then God gives us the freedom to argue.

Now there's a difference between argument when we are questioning to know and to understand, and we're simply complaining that we don't like our circumstances. In Israel, during the wilderness they would come to God and they would complain: they would argue; and they would question. When they complained, "we don't have food, we don't have water, Moses what are you going to do about this?" at times, God was angry and judged them because they were not
asking the umpire for clarification, they were coming to the umpire and questioning his integrity. So there's a right way and a wrong way, but I believe theologically, God gives us the right to argue with him.

Psalms of Lament

In the Psalms, one of the things that I noticed is that the Psalmist does not simply ask God, for certain things, the Psalmist will actually give God the reasons and the motivations for why God should answer. "Lord, save me from death, or I will no longer be able to sing your praises. God, if you don't save me there's going to be one less person at choir practice next week!" They are actually not just asking God to do something, they're giving God the reasons and the motivations why they believe God should do that. Jeremiah is doing the same thing with that. "Lord, here's what I think you should do about this, and here are the reasons. This situation where I'm suffering at the hands of my enemies, it's unjust! Do something about this!" Jeremiah has the right and the freedom to do that. God also has the right to say, “I understand your reasons, but in my sovereignty I have better reasons for what I’m doing even if I don’t explain them to you.” Ultimately we come to a place where we accept God’s answer and we grow and we learn through that in the same way that Habakkuk did. But, the process of faith, the process of learning, is not just doubting God but coming to a place where we are trying to understand. So there’s a long history in the Old Testament of people arguing with God. There is also, in the Old Testament a long history of people bringing negative emotions to God.

Many people don’t understand this, but the predominant genre in the Psalms, which is the hymn book of ancient Israel, the predominant genre of the Psalms is lament. As many as one-third of the Psalms are characterized as lament and laments are exactly what Jeremiah is doing here. When I read these passages from Jeremiah, I’m reminded very much of similar types of prayers, expressions, imagery, things said to God that are in those laments that are found in the Psalms. In Psalm 6:6-8 the psalmist says this, “I am weary with my moaning. Every night I
flood my bed with my tears. I drench my couch with my weeping, my eye wastes away because of my grief. It grows weak because of all of my foes.” This is not just rejoice in the Lord always and be happy and put on this façade. That’s not always where we’re at in life. So, there’s this long history of bringing these negative emotions to God and in the Psalms and in Jeremiah’s prayers.

One of the things that impresses me is that often they go to really extreme lengths to help God to understand what they’re going through. Why do we need to do that? God’s omniscient, I thought he knew what I was going through. Why do I need to give him a detailed description of my troubles? Often they take real pains in a poetic way to say, “God, look, I want you to really understand! I’m going to paint a picture for you of what I’m going through.” Listen to the way that the psalmist in Psalm 22 describes the opposition of his enemies. We know that ultimately this is a prayer that Jesus prays on the cross, but it’s also a prayer that describes David’s hardship and the enemies and the opposition he’s experiencing. He says in verse 12: “Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion. I am poured out like water, all of my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; its melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue clings to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.” In a sense, that’s what Jeremiah is doing and the Psalmist is not just describing this to God. He uses very powerful, vivid images to do that.

Theology of Prayer

Again I believe the reason for this is that this is part of the healing process. Being able to take those negative emotions, the pain that’s there, and there is healing that comes out of this as we dialogue with God. What we are beginning to understand about prayers, we talk about this long history of arguing with God and this long history of people bringing their negative emotions to God, prayer is not about putting a dollar in the coke machine and getting back something. Prayer is about a relationship where we come to God and we pour out our hearts to him and
we bring every aspect of our personality to God. We’re absolutely honest with him. We revere him, we respect him, we petition him, but we also grow to know him through that process. So there’s a long history of arguing with God, there’s a long history of people bringing negative emotions to God.

Most of the psalms and the laments are going to turn to praise at some point, but we even have songs like 88 where there is no word of praise. There’s nothing there but darkness, gloom, depression. To be honest, people are there sometimes in life and we’re going to minister to people that are there in that place in life. They need to know these psalms. Ministry for us is often going to be a terribly lonely occupation. We need to know these psalms because there’s healing that comes from being able to come to God in this way.

Praying Accusatory Language at God

So there is a long history of arguing with God, Jeremiah’s doing that. There is a long history of bringing negative emotions to God, Jeremiah’s doing that. There is also a long history of people bringing accusatory language toward God. Now I’ve already said that we can argue with God, and that sounds kind of theologically dangerous. Now I’m actually going to suggest that again if we do this in a worshipful way, understanding God, his holiness, his greatness, his love, his mercy, we can come to God with accusatory language. In fact, Craig Broyles says, that in the Psalms, there are more than sixty of them that have some type of accusatory language toward God. We’ve already seen Jeremiah saying, “God! You’re like a deceptive brook. The people have followed broken cisterns by worshipping false gods, but in many ways God hasn’t been much more helpful to me.” That’s a pretty powerful accusation.

Broyles notes that sometimes, the accusatory language toward God takes the form of charging God with passive neglect. Psalm 13, “How long Lord are you going to ignore my prayers, forever? Where are you?” But at other times there’s going to be accusatory language toward God where the Psalmist, really in a more in your face way is going to say, “God has actively brought this trouble into my
life.” Sometimes we go through adversity and we say, “God allowed this to happen.” There’s theological validity in doing that. The psalmists many times though, you're not going to look at the secondary agent that’s bringing the trouble rather “God you did this to me.”

One of the most powerful examples of this in the Psalms is found when the people of God come to the Lord in Psalm 44, and they are going to accuse God of not keeping his covenant. They understood that there was the possibility that if they obeyed God they would be blessed, if they disobeyed they would be punished. So one of the punishments that God would bring on them was military defeat. But what’s going on in Psalm 44 is that it appears that the people had been faithful to God. This is not a time of apostasy yet, in spite of that, they have experienced some form of military defeat. We could argue, “Well, maybe they are just defending themselves.” But it seems like they’re coming to God with an honest plea here. What they say in Psalm 44:8 is: “In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. But you have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies. You have made us turn back from the foe, and those who hate us have gotten spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and you have scattered us among the nations. You have sold our people for a trifle. You have made us the taunt of our neighbors. You have made us a byword among the nations.” Then in verse 17: “all of this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you and we have not been false to the covenant.” It’s not just “Look at what the enemy did here Lord, do something about this.” They are directly accusing God of being the one who is responsible for their problems. The imagery we have here is the anti-Psalm 23. In times of joy and blessing and even in trouble there were places where Psalmist could reflect and say, “the Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want and he’ll protect me.” But in this passage it says, “We are like sleep for the slaughter.” Where’s “the Lord is my shepherd”? We’re at the butcher house now. So that’s the degree of accusatory language that people can bring to God.
Job brings accusatory language toward God. It says at the beginning of Job that Job did not curse God, but as you read it, sometimes it looks like he got pretty close. I have to wonder, as I’m reading Jeremiah 15:18 and Jeremiah says, “Lord you are to me as a deceptive brook,” Jeremiah’s gotten pretty close to the edge. But it’s a reminder of how we can come to God and how we can approach God. Listen to what Job says in Job 13:23-28, “How many are my iniquities and my sins. Make me know my transgression and my sin.” Lord, if all this stuff that’s happened in my life is the result of some kind of sin or something that I’ve done, tell me what I did and I’ll change. “Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy? Will you frighten a driven leaf and pursue dry chaff? For you write bitter things against me and make me inherit the iniquities of my youth. You put my feet in the stocks and watch over all of my past and set a limit for the soles of my feet. Man wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is mothy.” We know from chapters 1 and 2 in Job that it’s really Satan that’s done these things. Job says “God, you did it to me.” I think one of the things that is a reality about God is that sometimes we need to just come to the terrifying reality that God can do anything that he wants to us and sometimes that’s a scary thought. God is holy and God is righteous but that’s a scary thought. Job deals with this in chapter 16 verse 11. “God gives me up to the ungodly, casts me into the hand of the wicked. I was at ease and he broke me apart. He seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces. He set me up as his target; his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare. He pours out my gall on the ground. He breaks me with breach upon breach and he runs upon me like a warrior.” God’s like a warrior and he’s declared war on me. What did I do?

Theology of Prayer

So in light of this tradition of prayer in the Old Testament, where these prayers are not just the words of man to God, they’re the words of God to us. We receive and understand that there’s a model of prayer here, that we can come to God and approach him in this way. There’s a long history of arguing with God.
There’s a long history of expressing negative emotions to God. There’s a long history beyond that of people coming to God and, again, in a worshipful and respectful way, of accusing God of neglecting them or abandoning them. Now in light of that, and I know we’ve spent some time flipping around, turning around to the different scriptures, but let’s go back and let’s listen to Jeremiah 15:18 once again: “Why is my pain unceasing? Why is my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” Do you hear the questions there? He’s arguing with God. Do you hear the negative emotions there? My pain is unceasing. My wound is incurable, refusing to be healed.” And then finally again that comment “will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” There’s accusatory language toward God. So if Jeremiah’s prayers are not righteous prayers, then there is a long tradition of prayer in the Old Testament that we’re going to have to deal with as well.

Jeremiah 20

Now, I’d like to look at another one of Jeremiah’s statements about the Lord in the confession that’s found in Jeremiah chapter 20. Again, it’s one of those places where we might look at the text and ask the question, “Can you talk to God like this?” Jeremiah begins this confession in chapter 20 verse 7, “O Lord, you have deceived me.” Now throughout the rest of the book, the Lord is going to talk about the deceptive message of the false prophets or the deceptive ways that Israel has trusted in Baal and Baal has turned out to be hevel for them. But, “O Lord, you have deceived me. And I was deceived.” The word that is used here for “deceived me” is the Hebrew verb patah. Preparing for this lesson I began to look at some of the different contexts where the verb patah is used and what does it. What does this word mean? In Exodus 22:6, it’s the word that’s used to describe a man who seduces a virgin and then is required to marry her. “The Lord has deceived me.” In Deuteronomy 16:11, it is a verb that is used to talk about people who are deceived in their worship of other gods. In the book of Judges, in chapter 14, it’s the word that the Philistines used talking to Samson’s wife and they say, “entice him to tell
us what we want to know.” In 1 Kings chapter 22, it’s the word that’s used in the story where the Lord is standing in the midst of the divine council and he says to his messengers, “who will go and patah, [entice] Ahab and convince him to go into battle so that I can put him to death?” Now, we understand why God would want to entice and to seduce and to deceive Ahab. He was the worst king that Israel had. The prophet says, “Lord, you have deceived me.” We certainly can’t take every aspect of a verb that’s found in whatever context and plug all of them in to this one passage. But the idea of the seduction of a virgin, the enticing of a husband, the deception of a wicked man, there’s some strong accusatory language directed toward God.

Then Jeremiah says, “You are stronger than I and you have prevailed. [I didn’t have a choice. This is not a fair fight.]” That’s one of the reoccurring things that Job is going to say, “Lord I just want to have a man to man meeting with you” and God is in a sense going to come back to him and say, “we’re one man short.” Jeremiah already realizes that “you’re stronger than I am. You have prevailed over me. I have become a laughing stock all the day. Everyone mocks me from whenever I speak or I cry out, then I shout violence and destruction. The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and a derision all day long. But I can’t stop. I have to pronounce God’s word because God has overwhelmed me.”

I come away from this thinking that to talk to God in this way, you have to know him very, very well. This is not like talking to your aunt in Cleveland, whom you visit once a year and you’re afraid to sit on her sofa. This is talking to someone with whom you have a deep, personal relationship. So I believe that instead of these being prayers where we need to sit down with Jeremiah and say, “you know Jeremiah, you need some therapy.” Or “You need some prayer theology. You need to take a class on prayer at our church.” I think in a sense, we need to learn to take a class from Jeremiah, and to learn what real prayer, real struggle, real interaction with God looks like.
I want to conclude this lesson and again place Jeremiah’s prayers within the context of Old Testament prayer. The things that Jeremiah is going to pray in these prayers resonate with prayers that we find, that are almost verbatim, or at least the same concepts and ideas, that are found in other Old Testament prayers. For example, in Jeremiah 15:10, Jeremiah says, “Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me.” In the final confession in chapter 20, the last words in chapter 20:14-18, Jeremiah curses the day of his birth. In Job 3:3, Job does not curse God, but he does curse the day of his birth and he says “I wish that I’d never been born.”

Jeremiah’s Imprecations

In Jeremiah 12:3, Jeremiah says this, “Lord, you know me. You see me and you test my heart towards you.” Then he speaks about his enemies, “Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart for the day of slaughter.” He is no longer praying that God will forgive them. They have rejected the Word of God. They have rejected God’s offer, and the prophet is simply praying here God destroyed them, give them what they deserve, in a sense appealing to God’s covenant, God said that people are judged and dealt with by God on the basis of their actions and the Lord and Jeremiah are saying, “Give them an eye for a eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Exactly what you’ve laid down in your law. We said, “Praying for his judgment is amazing, for them to be slaughtered, is that biblical?

In Psalm 58:10, “The righteous will be glad when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. It’s a disturbing passage. Psalm 58, “Lord, tear out the teeth of my enemies and their fangs. Let them melt away like water, like a slug on the sidewalk. Let them just simply vanish and be done away with.” Not just “Lord, put them to death,” but make it painful when you do that. Psalm 137, “O daughter of Babel doomed to destruction, blessed will be he who takes your infants and smashes them against the rocks.”

Jeremiah is praying for God’s righteous judgment. In a sense, using the curse language of the Old Testament and the context of holy, we understand all of these things, but ultimately, there is a cry for God’s justice in an unjust world and
that’s a righteous cry. Some have argued, this type of imprecation that’s Old
about the enemies of the gospel. Paul says, “If anyone preaches to you any other
gospel than that which I have preached to you, then let it be accursed, let him be
damned.” Revelation 6:10-11, the saints in heaven that have been martyred and
put to death and they’re in heaven, they’re free of their sin nature and they’re no
longer asking for vengeance and this sort of human vengeful way, but they’re
under the throne of God in heaven and saying, “How long, Lord, until you avenge
our death and bring judgment on those who have done this to us.”

When Jeremiah is praying for the destruction of his enemies, he is praying
for covenant rebels who have rejected God and the message of the Gospel. The
New Testament, in many ways, says the same thing about the enemies in the
gospel. Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:14, “Alexander the coppersmith has done me
much harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done.” There is a tradition
where we pray, “Lord, bring this person to fate.” We realize that you’re not
willing that any perish, that all should come to repentance, but there is also a
proper place for praying for God’s justice on those who are enemies of the Gospel.
We saw Jeremiah 18:21 “Therefore the deliver of their children to famine. Give
them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives become childless and
widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence.”

In Psalm 109, there is a similar prayer, maybe the harshest imprecation of
all with the judgment falling on the family of the evil-doer. Again, we look at this
and this is overwhelming, but this is part of the heart and the cry for justice.

Righteous Sufferers

Jeremiah 12:11, and this is the last one that we’ll mention here, Jeremiah
says, “Lord, righteous are you, O Lord.” He recognizes God’s character.
“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, and why do all who are
treacherous thrive?” Jeremiah says, “Look, I have a problem. I look at life. I have
been absolutely faithful to God and my life has turned out miserably. What about all those people who are getting wealthy, who are doing their thing, and they’re not experiencing this? God, where is your justice?” Before, we would think, you know I’m not sure you can talk that way to God, let me remind you of some other prayers.

The prayer of Asaph in Psalm 73, Asaph comes to God and just in an honest way, “Lord, I know that you’re good to those that are in Israel, but my feet have almost slipped. When I started to think about the prosperity of the wicked, they don’t go through the pangs that righteous people do. Why?” And finally, Asaph works through them and understands their ultimate destiny and in the end, but God does not rebuke him for asking the question.

Closing with the prime example here of Job. Job’s friends said, “Look, God is punishing you for your sin. God is a just God who blesses the righteous and rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.” In many ways, their theology is very close to the book of Proverbs. And Job is going to say, “I agree with your theology. I believe in your theology. I believe in the idea that God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked, but what you have to understand is your theology is not enough.” Job will say in chapter 21:7, “Why do the wicked live on? Why do they reach old age and grow mighty and powerful? Their offspring are established in their presence and their descendants before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear and no rod of God is upon them. Why?”

So, all of these questions, all of these prayers, all of these petitions that God hears from Jeremiah are things that God hears from other righteous people throughout the Old Testament. These confessions are a model of what real prayer is about.

And I’ve saved my last finishing point, my final attempt at trying to convince you about this. These are not just prayers of the Psalms. These are not just the prayers of Job. These are not just the prayers of Jeremiah. These are the prayers of Jesus Christ himself on the cross. Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why
have you forsaken me?” Hebrews 5:7, “Jesus was saved by God because he cried out to him with loud cries.” I believe that passage is talking about the laments in the songs. Worship is not just about praise and joy and happiness and blessing and the Lord is my shepherd. The prayer is also a time of being honest with God. Jeremiah gives us a great model in these confessions of what honest and true prayer really looks like.
Introduction; The Broken Covenant

Our session now is a second look at Jeremiah’s confessions in Jeremiah 11-20. We looked in the previous lesson at how these confessions are an expression of Jeremiah’s personal relationship with God, but what I would like to see in this session is that these confessions are really a message toward Israel and toward the people of Judah about the broken covenant. So, in a sense, the prayers of Jeremiah become just as much a statement of what they are going through and the broken covenant with God as the sermons that he preaches. So, we need to understand these confessions--or these laments--in the context of the broken covenant between God and Israel that’s in the background of Jeremiah 11-20.

Jeremiah’s Confessions

Remember this section begins with a sermon in Jeremiah 11 where the Lord is basically charging Judah with covenant unfaithfulness and reminding them that he has and continues to be in the process of bringing the covenant curses against them. The Lord says in this particular sermon, Jeremiah chapter 11, verse 10: “They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers.” There’s the accusation. They’ve broken the covenant. They’re guilty. “Therefore,” here comes the announcement of judgment: “Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go out and cry to the gods to whom they make offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble. For your gods have become as many as your cities, O Judah, and as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have set up to shame,
altars to make offerings to Baal.” So, there’s a context of covenant brokenness; the covenant curses are coming. I believe that these confessions are a reflection and an expression of the broken covenant between God and Israel.

The Broken Relationship between God and Judah

I want to remind us that, in Jeremiah, there are four specific places: the first time that this occurs is right after the Temple Sermon in chapter 7, verse 16: You are not to pray for these people because I’ve already decided to judge them. Your prayers are not going to make a difference. Your intercession is not going to help them. That is a shocking thing, because intercession was one of the primary jobs of a prophet. Now, in case Jeremiah didn’t hear this, the Lord in chapter 11, verse 14, after the sermon about the broken covenant and the covenant curses: “Therefore, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble.” I’m not going to listen to your prayers for them, I’m not going to listen to their prayers, if they want help, if they want someone to save them, then they need to cry out to the gods that they have trusted and built altars to.

Jeremiah chapter 14, verse 11: “The Lord has said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.” Jeremiah, your prayers and your intercession are not going to deliver them from the covenant curses. It is not going to keep them from being destroyed by the sword, by famine, by pestilence. So, three different times here, the Lord says, you’re not to pray for these people--and so the prayers of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 11-20 are a reflection of that broken covenant. It’s not just a broken relationship between God and Judah there’s something broken about prayer and prophetic intercession itself. Now, this is hugely significant in light of the fact--as we already mentioned--praying for the people and interceding for the people, especially during times of apostasy or sin, was a major role that God had given to the prophets.
Prophetic Intercessions: Moses and Samuel

We go back to the example of Moses after the worship of the golden calf, after the people had listened to the response of the spies: first of all, in Exodus 32, Numbers 14, God says that he’s ready to destroy the people, and Moses comes to him and reminds him of the covenant promises that he’s made. What about the Egyptians? What about your reputation? What are they going to think when they hear that you have destroyed the people that you rescued and delivered out of bondage in Egypt? And it says there that the Lord changed his mind.

In the book of Samuel during the time when Israel asks for a king, the people had rejected God, in a sense, by doing that. The Lord had promised to provide them a king, but it would be on his terms and in his way and they had sinned against the Lord. At the end of Samuel’s life, as he’s calling them back to their responsibilities to keep the covenant he intercedes for them as a prophet and, in a sense, he turns away God’s judgment on the people by the sin that they had committed in asking for a king.

So, here’s what happens near the end of Samuel’s public ministry to the people. They’re together for this assembly and the Lord sends a thunderstorm during a time of harvest, when rain was not normally expected. The people got the message that God was sending them a word that he was displeased with them. So, it says that Samuel called upon the Lord and the Lord sent the thunder and the rain that day, and all of the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. So, he prayed, and God brought the thunder and the rain. But, then, the people are going to say this to Samuel in chapter 12 verse 19: “All the people said to Samuel, ‘pray for your servants to the Lord your God that we may not die for we have added to all of our sins this evil to ask for ourselves a king’.” They realize God is angry, they could potentially die as God puts them to death, please turn away God’s anger.

Verse 20: “Samuel said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil. Yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. And do not turn aside from empty things that cannot profit or deliver,
for they are empty. For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover,…” and this is the important verse here, “as for me, far be it from me, that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you.” So, in this particular situation, it was Samuel’s intercession that had spared the people when they had sinned by asking for a king. Samuel says, in my ongoing role, in the final days of my ministry, as I continue to be a prophet, far be it for me that I would sin by ceasing to pray for you. For a prophet not to pray for the people, that’s the ultimate sin. So, in a sense, it’s a strange thing that God is coming to Jeremiah and saying, look don’t fulfill your prophetic role, don’t intercede for this people.

God Changing His Mind: Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah

The exact opposite of what we see with Moses and with Samuel. In looking at that phrase that the Lord changed his mind, I really believe that if Moses doesn’t pray, then God destroys the people. This is not simply a metaphor; this is not simply, “God knew all along what he was going to do, so he’s just trying to teach Moses a lesson.” Moses’ intercession effectively changes the direction that God is going to take. So, in a sense, is this a metaphor? Yes; in some sense it is. God doesn’t change his mind in the way that we do; on a whim, I’m going to MacDonald’s instead of Burger King. God doesn’t change his mind in the sense that he has limited understanding or knowledge of what’s happening in the future as open theism has taught. But, it is saying beyond just simply being a metaphor that one of the real aspects of God’s nature in the Old Testament is that he was open to the prayers of his prophets and he changed the course of his actions based on either how the prophet would pray or how the people would respond. It’s a real thing. God is entering into real give-and-take relationships with the people.

In a sense, we almost have to understand that yes, there’s a God in the Bible who is eternal and outside of time and he knows all things, but there’s also a God who comes into time, interacts with people, deals with them in real history and in real give-and-take relationships. So the prayers of God’s prophets
ultimately at times change the direction of God’s actions.

Now there are some passages in the Bible like 1 Samuel 15 or Numbers 23 that say that God does not change his mind. What do we do with these passages that say there are times where God does change his mind? The answer is: It depends on the circumstances. There are times when God has sworn an oath, when God has made a covenant promise that he is not going to turn back from. God may have issued a sentence of judgment that he says is unalterable. At those times, the Lord does not change his mind. One of those times has happened when God rejects Saul as king, and Samuel, though, understanding that the Lord sometimes does change his mind, prays all night. If God is simply immutable and never changes his mind, there’s really no reason for him to do that. But when the Lord comes back to him and says in this particular case, “When the Lord has issued a decree that is unchangeable, when the Lord has sworn an oath, he does not change his mind.”

But in other times, like this situation with Moses, in Exodus 32, or like Moses again with the children of Israel in Numbers chapter 14, God is open to changing his course of direction based upon how people respond to him and prophetic intercession often turned God’s judgment away from the people of Israel and Judah.

We have another one of these examples of powerful and effective prophetic intercession in Amos 7:1-6. Amos sees a vision of a locust swarm that invades the land of Israel. Remember the devastating effects that those kinds of things could have, and this locust swarm almost completely consumes and destroys the land of Israel. As Amos sees that, it says that he cried out to the Lord and he said, “Ah! Lord God! Israel is too small! They could never survive this!” He comes to God, pleads for God’s mercy, gives God motivation for answering his prayer. And the amazing thing again, the same thing that we see with Moses, God relented, God nacham, he changed his mind. He did not bring the judgment. Then Amos sees the vision of the fire that sweeps through the land. Amos, by the same prayer, the
same petition to God, “Ah, Lord God, Israel’s too small.” They cannot withstand a judgment like this fire that’s going to sweep through the land and consume it. God changes his mind and not send the fire.

Past the Point of No Return

So, for God to say to Jeremiah, do not pray for these people, do not intercede for them, what that means is that that is an unalterable decree of judgment. We have seen the closing down at the beginning of Jeremiah 1-25, repeated, recurring calls for the people to return and the opportunity to do that. Then in chapters 17 and 11-20, there are only three calls to return. Then chapters 21-25, those calls basically disappear. There is a closing down of the opportunity to repent and that is reflected again in the fact that God tells Jeremiah, “Don’t waste your time praying for these people. We are past the point where I am willing to respond to that.”

Now looking at that past history that we’ve just talked about, the intercession of Moses and Samuel, they’re the primary examples of prophetic intercessors who delivered the people. The Lord says this to Jeremiah in chapter 15:1-2 and now I think these verses make more sense in light of what we just said. “The Lord said to me, ‘Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight and let them go and when they ask you, “Where shall we go?,” you shall say to them, thus says the Lord, ‘Those who are for pestilence to pestilence, those who are for sword, to the sword, those who are to famine, to famine, and those who are to captivity, to captivity.’” Look, if Moses and Samuel were to show up on the scene, and if they were to intercede, I would not listen.

So, we might look at Jeremiah’s ministry and say Jeremiah’s kind of a sub-prophet because you had these great prophets in Israel’s past who had it in with God, and God responded to them when the people had committed serious sin, the Lord forgave them and the Lord relented from sending judgment. The problem is not with Jeremiah’s gifting as a prophet. The problem is not that Jeremiah is not
as tight with God as Moses and Samuel were. The Lord says, “Look, even if Moses and Samuel were around today, they would not be able to intercede for these people.” There has been a closing down of the opportunities to repent. God now is saying the time for intercession, the time for praying for the people, that’s over because God is ready to destroy them.

So, at one level, we see God telling the prophet not to pray for Israel. And then, at the other level, in this same context and in this same chapter, we have the prophet praying to God. The confessions and the laments of Jeremiah reflect that he’s no longer interceding for the people of Israel. So, instead of praying for God to deliver them, Jeremiah is praying for God to slaughter his enemies like sheep for the slaughter because they are covenant rebels who have not listened to God. They have shaken their fists in God’s face, they have defied God, they have defied God’s messenger. It’s not simply that they’ve mistreated Jeremiah; they have rejected the word of God and on the basis of the covenant, they deserve this judgment.

So, the role of a prophet in the days of Moses, Samuel was to intercede that God would relent from sending judgment. The implications are reflecting that now the role of the prophet is to, in a sense, pray against the people. So, the brokenness of the covenant, the removal of prophetic intercession, is being reflected by these confessions where instead of praying these great prayers like Moses and Samuel prayed for God to spare the people. Jeremiah in the desperate situation that he is living in is actually praying for God to judge the people. Andrew Shead says that Jeremiah, in a sense, is functioning as a mediator between God and Israel. He represents the anger and the wrath of God toward the people of Israel, and he represents the pain and the sinfulness of Israel towards God. Shead says, “Standing between God and man in this situation is a painful place to be.”

So, the confessions, the laments of Jeremiah, reflect the breaking down of prophetic intercession. At another level, the prayers of Jeremiah, the intercession
of Jeremiah, however, is also a way of God reflecting himself through the person of Jeremiah to the point where Jeremiah becomes a living example of God to the people. As Jeremiah is praying and pouring out his heart, his pain, his grief and his sufferings, at one level, he represents a struggling human with all of his foibles and weaknesses, someone that I can definitely relate to as a minister of God, but at another level, he is representing God to Israel.

Jeremiah as a Symbol of God’s Pathos and Grief

The pain in these prayers is, in a sense, the grief of God over the sins of the people of Israel. This is not just in the confessions, this idea of the pain of God are the suffering of the prophet. Jeremiah you know, and Jeremiah is not just a sensitive guy who needs to get over some of this. He's not a guy who needs to go to therapy or something like this. In a sense, Jeremiah is representing, through his tears, the tears of God. That begins actually before we ever get to the laments. I want to go back to chapter 4 verses 19 to 22. Jeremiah's job is to express or to represent God to Israel; that's why Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. Again, it's not just because Jeremiah's really a sensitive guy or Jeremiah's a guy who is able to get in touch with his feminine side, or, Jeremiah is this kind of psychological prophet. This grief of the prophet is an expression of the pain and the grief of God himself. One of the things that commentators of the book of Jeremiah have noted is that in these passages where Jeremiah is talking about his pain, his weeping, he's the weeping prophet, sometimes it's difficult to tell who exactly is talking. Is it God or is it the prophet, is it the people or could, in some sense, it be all three of those things?

So one of these grief or anguish passages, one of the first ones we see in the book is back in Jeremiah chapter 4, verses 19 to 22. Listen to Jeremiah's grief and anguish. Jeremiah says, “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, and the alarm of war. Crash follows hard on crash, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are laid waste, my curtains in a moment. How
long must I see the standard and hear the sound of the trumpet?” Now these sound like the words of Jeremiah. He's observing the invading army and all of the terrible things are happening and he's grieving and mourning about this. This looks like the anguish of the prophet of this vision but listen to verse 22 and it says this, "For my people are foolish; and they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are ‘wise’--in doing evil! But how to do good they know not." There at that point it's difficult for us to say as it's talking about "my people". Is it the prophet or is it the Lord? I'm not sure that interpretively we need to make a choice: I think it's both. Jeremiah has swallowed the words of God in a sense that he's become the expression of God in his person. So we don’t really need to know is it Jeremiah or is it God, it’s both.

Chapter 9, verses 1 to 3, is another expression before we ever get to the confessions of Jeremiah’s pain and grief over the destruction over his people, Jeremiah says, “Oh that my head were waters, and that my eyes were a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” Again, it seems like the human reaction of a prophet to the destruction and the death and the doom that’s going to be visited on the people of Judah. Then he goes on to say in verse 2, “Oh that I had in the desert a travelers’ lodging place, that I may leave my people and go away from them!” I wish I could escape from this but instead I weep constantly because of the disaster. So is it the prophet or is it the Lord? Well, it sounds like the prophet. But in verse 3, we read this, “They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil and they do not know, me declares the Lord.” And so, maybe it is Jeremiah who wishes that he could weep day and night because of the destruction that’s coming on Israel. But it’s the grief of God, it’s the voice of God that answers in verse 3. In a sense, here what is happening is the weeping of the prophet becomes the weeping of God. The voice of the prophet coalesces into the voice of God. This back and forth, is expressed as well as when we go further down into chapter 9. What we have there is that the Lord goes back and forth
between his anger and his grief--his anger and his grief.

God’s Pain and Sadness within the Old Testament

You know, we have this understanding of God sometimes in the Old Testament. He’s simply a God of wrath, he’s a God of anger, he loves to destroy, he loves to send pestilences on people. He loves to zap them with lightning bolts. This section is revealing the pain of God himself, as he observes and watches what is happening to his people. Listen to the emotion that comes out. First of all there’s going to be the emotion of extreme anger in verse 9. The Lord says, “Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord, and shall I not avenge myself on them on a nation such as this?” Absolutely. Remember they were an unfaithful prostitute. They had been unfaithful to the covenant for hundreds and hundreds of years. They had betrayed God by worshiping other idols. They had been like a wife unfaithful to her husband. “Shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?” Absolutely. But listen to the grief that comes out in verse 10. Is it God or is it the prophet? “I will take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the beasts have fled and are gone.” There’s this sadness. Look at the ruin, look at the devastation. Look at the destruction that has come on the people of God and it’s like this seems to be the prophet again as one of the people experiencing what’s going on. But in verse 11, the Lord is speaking. And the Lord says, “I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals, and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without habitation.” So what we have going on here is God is speaking in verse 9, God is speaking words of anger. God is speaking in verse 11, God is speaking words of anger. There is this section of grief in verse 10 where the speaker is not clearly identified. But we have to hear that in some way as the voice of God because he’s the one who’s speaking both before and after.

God’s Grief and Anger within the Old Testament

There is this idea of God who is angered by the people’s sins, the fierce
anger of the Lord will not turn back until it's accomplished all that he's designed, but, on the other side, God’s broken heart over the destruction of the daughter of Jerusalem, his daughter, his wife. He’s experiencing all of these things. We talked about the language of the judgment of Judah as a woman and often how many feminists criticize that as an expression of just things about women that are not appropriate for our culture and our time or that God is being portrayed as an abusive husband or a divine rapist. But I want to remind us that the purpose of this was not simply to vent his anger, it is to pour out the pain of a betrayed husband.

I remember when all of my children got their driver's license. They had to go and appear in front of the judge and be reminded of the privileges and responsibilities that go along with driving. The judge turned over the session to a police officer who showed all of our kids a video of a traffic accident that took the life of a young person. The judge did not do that because he hated kids and wanted to see them in car wrecks. The police officer did not do that because he had been jaded by his years in law enforcement. The judge and the officer painted those vivid pictures as a warning to my children. As a parent, I sat there and was I was thankful that they did that. I see God doing the same thing through the prophet Jeremiah.

Theologians sometimes have talked about the “impassability” of God, the idea that God is so separate from his creation and so holy other that God does not experience either pain or joy by any other creature or their response or their reaction to them. I understand the reason why theologian’s wanted to stress God’s un-changeability, his immutability, his holy otherness, but that image of God does not work with the book of Jeremiah. God is definitely a God who grieves over the pain of his people. Terrence Fretheim has talked about the suffering of God and I think that is a very accurate portrayal of the God of the book of Jeremiah. God weeps along with the prophet Jeremiah. He is not a God who is sitting impassively in heaven saying, “I’m going to work this out, I’m going to
accomplish my sovereign purpose, and ultimately, I’m happy with that.” The Lord, as he sees people making choices that bring about destruction on themselves, as the relationship with his people is severed, he grieves over that. The idea of an impassable God, for whatever theological reasons we may want to use to protect the immutability of God, it simply is not an accurate portrayal of the God of the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 12:7-11, again the emotion of God in all of this and the back and forth between God’s pain and God’s anger. Chapter 12:7, the Lord says, “I have forsaken my house: I have abandoned my heritage; I have given” – and listen to how he describes the people – “the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.” God didn’t do that because he wanted to destroy them and the fact that he describes him as the beloved of his soul, and as his heritage, and as his most precious possession, it reflects how deeply this pained the Lord.

The Prophet Hosea, Hosea 11:8-9, the Lord says, “How can I give Ephriam up?” No matter what they’ve done, I cannot give them up, I will not stop loving them. Therefore, I will not vent the full wrath and anger of God upon my people and I will not completely consume them and destroy them. But the Lord says that I’ve forsaken my heritage, I’ve abandoned the beloved of my soul and that causes God deep pain. Amazing image of God, just think about God in that light. But then, God comes back in Jeremiah chapter 12, verse 8 and says, “My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest; she has lifted up her voice against me; therefore I hate her.” So let's juxtapose that. The beloved of my soul – I hate her. Sometimes we use the expression today that God loves the sinner and hates the sin, and I understand the reasons why we do that, but at times, the Old Testament is almost going to convey the idea that God doesn’t just hate the sin, he hates the sinner as well. That’s a scary thing to deal with, but that’s God’s wrath, that’s God’s anger, it’s a part of the Old Testament that we need to hear it.

Verse 9--“Is my heritage to me like a hyena’s lair? Are the birds of prey against her all around? Go, and assemble all of the wild beasts; and bring them to
deavor. Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard; they have trampled down my portion; they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness.” So here’s the Lord in his anger saying, “I’m going to bring these wild animals against Judah, and I’m going to have these wild animals destroy them” but then in the next verse, the Lord is grieving over the fact that the leaders of Israel are the ones who have destroyed his beautiful vineyard. The Lord had planted it and blessed it, in a place where it was going to be absolutely fruitful, but it is the leaders and the Lord grieves over that. Verse 11, “They have made it a desolation: desolate, it mourns to me.” So the land is mourning, and God hears that weeping and it touches his heart and it grieves him at the same time that he is giving the vineyard over to the wild animals to eat it and to consume it. Then in the midst of this mourning, the Lord says, “Upon all of the bare heights in the desert destroyers have come, the sword of the Lord devours from one end of the land to the other; no flesh has peace. They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns; they have tired themselves out but profit nothing. They shall be ashamed of their harvests because of the fierce anger of the Lord.” So again, we have this passage. Which is it, God? Are you a God of passionate love, and is Israel the beloved of your soul or is it the target of your judgment that you hate and that you want to consume in your fierce anger? The answer is: both of those things.

So, as Jeremiah is praying his confessions and at least in places as Jeremiah is grieving over what is happening, and what he’s experiencing, and what he’s going through he is not just expressing the hardships of his own ministry, he is reflecting the grief and the heart of God over what is happened in the midst of this fractured and broken covenant where the relationship between God has been severed from his people.

God’s Rejection of Judah’s Prayers of Repentance

Yet we are in the mist of this context dealing with broken covenant, we are in the mist of this context where we have confessions and laments of the prophets are all under the prophet Jeremiah. Now God is going to specifically say this to
Jeremiah are to the people [14:17-18], “You shall say to them this word: '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 grievous blow. If I go out into the field, behold, those pierced by the sword! And if I enter the city, behold, the diseases of famine! For both prophet and priest ply their trade through the land and have no knowledge.” Here is what's important in this passage, the Lord says to Jeremiah “You shall say to them this word: Let my eyes run down with tears.” So what’s significant about this is that the weeping of the prophet is actually the revelation of God. God says I want you to weep and that is my word to them in this particular situation. So again it not just that Jeremiah is a human being saying this an awful situation, it not just Jeremiah's human emotion, its not just Jeremiah as a member of the people of Israel thinking “look at what our country is going to go through,” it’s not just Jeremiah grieving and the Lord saying to him, “suck it up Jeremiah that’s the word of the Lord let's move on.” The Lord says to Jeremiah, as part of your prophetic word, don’t just say “Thus says the Lord,” also stand in front of them and say, “thus weeps the Lord.” Andrew Shead makes this comment he says “If God's intention and God’s design had simply been to tell the people the message that they needed to hear, the Lord could have communicate that message from the distances of the divine council in heaven; but the Lord wanted to communicated that message via a person, via an instrument. And by seeing the weeping of Jeremiah, “Oh that my head were a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night,” that’s not just an overly sensitive prophet that is God himself grieving for the destruction of his people.”

So beyond simply the confessions being an expression of Jeremiah's personal difficulty, the confessions are about the brokenness of the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant is broken, the marriage is irreparably damaged, and prayer itself is shutting down.

Command Not to Pray

Instead of praying for the people, Jeremiah is called to pray against them
and to ask God to judge them. Now as a prophet the Lord comes to you, the Lord
tells you don’t pray for those people, how would you respond to that? If you are
the pastor of a church and you hear a message from God one day, don’t pray for
your flock, I think as much as you wanted to listen to what God said, you would
probably pray even when you couldn't help yourself. Jeremiah in a very real way
does that in chapter 14 because we have the brokenness of prayer, not just between
God and the prophet but we have the brokenness of prayer between God and the
people. In chapter 14 the people come to God with a confession of their sin and
here is when they're going to pour their hearts and prayer to God.

Remember that Jeremiah is the one who is expressing these prayers for the
people so in a sense God had said Jeremiah don't pray for these people don't
intercede for them I'm not going to answer anyway. Jeremiah is praying a
confession of sin for the people, he's doing what God told him not to do. Here is
what the prayer says: “Though our iniquities testify against us act, Oh Lord for
you name's sake, for our backslidings are many, our shuvs, our turning away are
many.” That is what the prophet had said about them back in chapters two and
three, we have sinned against you. Let me ask you a question, does that sound like
a good confession? It looks pretty good, it's got all the right elements in there, a
proper measure of humility and all that. This is what a confession is supposed to
be. Then they say to God, “Oh you hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble,
why should you be like a stranger in the land and like a traveler who turns aside to
tarry for a night? Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior
who cannot save us. Lord, why would you turn away from your people? Yet you O
Lord are in the midst of us and we are called by your name, do not leave us.” Is
that a good confession, absolutely, they are confessing their sins. They're
confessing their needs and their dependence on God.

In fact, this is the kind of prayer that Jeremiah tells them back in chapter 3
verses 22-25, this is what you need to pray. The Lord says there: “Return, O
faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness.” The people say, “Behold, we come to
you, for you are the Lord our God. Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains. Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.” That passage is envisioning the time when they are finally going to renounce their idols. They are finally going to revoke their past practices and they are going to turn to God in confession.

We look at this in chapter 14 and well maybe we are here, maybe we are finally at this place and all of this judgment and all of these other things that are going to happen in the rest of the book are not necessary. They are saying exactly all the right words to God, they are not saying the words to God that they said when he indicted them in the court room in chapter two. We have not sinned, we have not followed after all the Baals, we are innocent, we don't understand what you are talking about. “At the same time they were saying, “Lord, we can't help ourselves, we have to run after these gods. We say to a tree you are our father, we say to a stone you are our mother.” Now they are not saying those kinds of things - they are saying the right words. So we think that God obviously is going to answer their prayers. God obviously is going say, “Great we are going to have a time of national revival, the judgment is averted”--that’s the end of the book of Jeremiah. But, no, verse 10 says this thus says the Lord concerning those people, “They have loved to wander thus, they have not restrained their feet, therefore the Lord does not accept them.” Now he would remember their iniquity and he will punish their sins.

God’s Sadness and Determination while Enacting His Judgment

Jeremiah don't pray for these people. Jeremiah: Lord I can't help it I've got to pray for them. The people are coming to you and confessing their sins. The Lord says, “Jeremiah I am not going to listen because they are just words. And they have not restrained their feet they are not really turning around! In a shocking statement the Lord says here is I am going to remember their iniquity. If you think about the new covenant passage in Jeremiah 31 when the Lord says, “I will no longer remember their sins,” we are not at that point yet because the people have
not been changed, they have not been transformed. Great prayer and great words, orthodox, it can make it to any conventional book of prayer but words without real substantive repentance don't mean anything. So if that’s not enough. The prophet comes to the Lord again on the behalf of the people with another confession in the same chapter and immediately after this passage where the Lord has said, “let my eyes run down with tears day and night and let them not cease for the virgin daughter of my people is shattered.” The people come to God again and again he tells the prophet, don't pray for these people. Jeremiah responds, “Lord I can't help it, I am going to pray for them anyway.”

Here’s the prayer that’s found there [Jer 14:19]: “Have you utterly rejected Judah? Does your soul loathe Zion? Why have you struck us down so that there is no healing for us? We looked for peace, but no good came, we look for a time of healing, but behold, terror.” Now right here it almost sounds like our suffering is kind of unjust. We don’t understand what you’re doing. Listen to what they say after this in verse 20 of chapter 14: “We acknowledge our wickedness, O Lord, and the iniquity of our fathers.” They’re no longer saying, “the fathers eat the sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” We’re just as sinful as our fathers, they acknowledge that. “We have sinned against you. Do not spurn us, for your name’s sake: do not dishonor your glorious throne, [Jerusalem].” And then they say this: “Remember and do not break your covenant with us.” This is highly ironic, right? Chapter 11 introducing the section says, you have broken the covenant, the covenant curses are coming. Chapter 14, Lord don’t break your covenant with us, this is a good prayer, again it could work in our liturgical prayer books.

But this is the time God responds in chapter 15, “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn towards these people. Send them out of my sight” and they will experience pestilence, plague, and all of things that the Lord had threatened to bring against them. The covenant curses are coming into effect. Great confession, great words of prayer, the Lord is not going
to respond; Jeremiah do not pray for these people. Here the Lord is going to continue what he’s going to do. Here is the response to that great confession: “I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers”, declares the Lord: “the sword to kill, dogs to tear, birds of the air, and the beast of earth to devour and destroy. And I will make them a horror to all of the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem.”

Now the judgment that he had threatened a while ago that he has diverted, that’s back in play. The Lord is not listening to their prayers and God is going to again talk about the grief of all of this in the verses that follow and we’ll close by looking at this passage. Chapter 15, verse 5, “Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem, or who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? You have rejected me, declares the Lord; you keep going backward, so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you--I am weary of relenting. I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork in the gates of the land; I have bereaved them; I have destroyed my people.” You see this angry God, but I also see the irony of that question: “Who will have pity on you oh Jerusalem? Or who will grieve for you?” The answer to that is the Lord himself will.

God says in verse 8, “I have made their widows more in number than the sands of the sea.” The people said don’t break your covenant with us, in the Abrahamic covenant, God promises to make the people of Israel as numerous as the sands on the seashore. Now in the reversal of the Abrahamic covenant, God is making their widows more than the sands on the seashore. The covenant is broken. “She who has bore seven has grown feeble; she has fainted away; her sun went down while it was yet day; she has been shamed and disgraced. And the rest of them I will give to the sword before their enemies, declares the Lord.”

Conclusion

The confessions of Jeremiah are not just the prayers of a struggling prophet. They, in a sense, help us to see a grieving God. In our theology of God, Jeremiah 11-20 reminds us of something very powerful: that God is a God of incredible
passion and emotion. He is a God who experiences and who feels wrath and anger over sin and we best not neglect or avoid or try to do away with that aspect of God. But his is also a God of love and mercy and compassion and grace who grieves even as he brings judgment on his people. Through the confessions of Jeremiah, we’re not only given insight into the character of the prophet, we’re also provided revelation into the character and the nature of God himself.
In this session we are taking a final look at Jeremiah’s confessions that are scattered and spread throughout Jeremiah chapter 11-20. In the first section where we looked at the confessions we saw how they stand within the prayer and the worship tradition of the Old Testament that Jeremiah’s prayers represent the same kinds of righteous prayers we see other people in the Old Testament presenting. In our last session we talked about how the confessions of Jeremiah are not just the cries of a prophet, but in a sense are an expression of revelation about God’s character as God is responding to the destruction of his people and the judgment that he’s bringing upon them. The confession reflects both God’s anger and God’s grief. We saw how those two emotions mingle with each other.

Jeremiah in a sense has become the word of God not just by the things that he says when he proclaims, “Thus says the Lord,” Jeremiah has become the word of God by his very life and his very person. Andrew Shead talks about this in his book *A Mouth Full of Fire*, one of my favorite books on the theology of the book of Jeremiah and on page 138 of that book Shead makes this statement: “In the life of Jeremiah God’s word his message is made concrete and immediate to those who hear and see it, and in so far as God conveys himself, his character, his will, his inmost thoughts by his word we might say that in the life of his prophet God makes himself present to his people. It is the word of God, not Jeremiah, that we hear when Jeremiah speaks. It is the word of God, not Jeremiah that we see when Jeremiah acts. Jeremiah’s life itself is one great acts of divine self-communication. So, in a sense, Jeremiah as an expression of God’s word prefigures Jesus as the incarnate word of God who in a full way exegetes and explains to us who God is.”
A few pages later on page 141, Shead also says this, “Were Jeremiah simply to stand over against the people and address them from the divine council as God’s emissary, his message could be perfectly understood. However, it turns out that this cannot do justice to the word of God in its particularity. This is because God does not stop loving his people in order to judge them but suffers through their suffering through the suffering of Jeremiah.” We saw that in the last lesson. “Despite Jeremiah relegation to the status of one the nations, God never stops addressing her as bride and daughter, and by refusing to withhold his love the reverse also is allowed to happened we see Jeremiah suffering with God’s own suffering and his rejection by the people that he loves.” And so Jeremiah is, in his confessions and really in his prophetic ministry as a whole, representing God before the people.

I want to remind us that Jeremiah is also representing the people before God, Jeremiah is also representing himself as an individual who is a part of that people before God. We have to understand Jeremiah’s laments and confessions in light of that, the difficulties that Jeremiah is experiencing as a prophet and then through the suffering and the anguish of the people, the prophet is trying to express that to God so that God can understand what his people feel. I saw a cartoon about prayer in the church where a women stands up to pray in the church service and she says this: “Lord I lay before you all of the prayer concerns that have been voiced by the brothers this morning even though most of them sound like whining to me.”

Our reaction is that we look at the prayers of a Jeremiah and it sounds like whining. Jeremiah grow up, what’s up with Jeremiah being the weeping prophet? Is he just a sensitive guy who needs to get over this? Jeremiah is expressing the deep hurt and anger of God in his confessions but he’s also expressing his own deep hurt and the deep hurt of the people as they suffered through the experiences of exile. Jeremiah is a mediator between God and the people. In one direction, in that mediatorial role, Jeremiah is helping the people to see the anger and the hurt
of God. Coming at it from another direction as a mediator Jeremiah is trying to help God see the hurt and suffering of the people. Jeremiah is standing between God and Israel. As we said, a couple of sessions ago that is a dangerous place to be. If you have ever been in a difficult counseling situation where there is a badly fragmented relationship or marriage and are trying to mediate, that is a dangerous place to be. Whatever you say to try to help the husband may offend the wife and whatever your say to help the wife may offend the husband. Everyone wants you to take their side. Jeremiah in a sense is almost in the counseling room with God and Israel. He’s standing between them, so we need to sympathize with Jeremiah and the struggles he’s going through. So let’s think about the confessions as Jeremiah is expressing his own part, and his pain and his own grief towards God. It is a reminder that in ministry, ministry is not a career, ministry is a calling and ministry can often involve some very difficult things.

We have that inclusio in Jeremiah chapter 1 where God says, “I have called you from the womb,” Jeremiah 1:5. Then we have the close or the end of that inclusio with chapter 20:18, “Lord, I wish that I had never been born, I wish I had never come forth from my mothers womb.” Maybe that’s something we need to read to people at the end of seminary graduation. The slogan of some of our seminaries may be at some point, “we’re training people who will wish they had never been born.” Ministry at times can become very toxic.

The difficulty and something we need to be aware of in our own spiritual lives is that as we are trying to help people in their relationship with God we’re going to see things, experience things, go through things that at times will fragment our own relationship with the Lord. We are going to have to work hard at keeping that. Ministry can be a toxic thing. This is a common experience of prophets and messengers of God in the Old Testament. I want to talk about a prime example of this, Moses represents this, in Numbers chapter 11 Moses expresses something that I can imagine if I was the leader of the people of Israel that this might have been my thought at least at one time or another as I was
leading the people through the wilderness. Numbers says, “Moses heard the people weeping through their clans, everyone at the door of his tent and the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased because they are complaining and griping about not having food and provisions.” And Moses says this to the Lord, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant, and why have I not found favor in your sight that you lay the burden of all of these people on me? Did I deceive all of these people? Did I give them birth that you should say to me carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing child to the land that you swore to give to their fathers?” Lord did I give birth to all these people that now I am responsible for them? And what had happened that Moses in his role of being a deliverer for the people had imperiled in some sense his own relationship with God and there’s a fracture. Lord why did you put this on me?

I remember as we move forward in the story of Moses through chapter 20 and again its one of those situations where the people are complaining about not having water God tells Moses to speak to the rock. Moses strikes the rock and God says because you did this you are not going to be allowed to go into the promise land. I have read that story many times and its one of those times where I’d like to argue with God and say, “Can I stand in on Moses’ behalf? Moses got a raw deal here deal here. Moses had to put up with people who griped and complained and moaned and whined for 40 years and then he hit a rock and your not going to let him go into the promise land? In some sense Moses had improperly displayed to the people what God was like in his own anger. Moses perhaps in some sense has taken glory away from God by striking the rock rather than speaking to it, indicating that he was the one who had brought the water out, but Moses in some sense got a raw deal and it reminds us of the difficulties and toxicity of ministry at times.

In Deuteronomy chapter 3 verse 26 Moses talks to the people and he says, “the Lord was angry with me because of you and that’s the reason I’m not going to be able to go into the promised land.” Now you say, “Well, Moses is just blaming
the people.” In a sense what Moses is saying is right. I think Jeremiah in his confession as he’s pouring out his heart to God he’s saying the same kind of things Moses is saying: “God did I give birth to all these people?”

Ezekiel at the end of Israel’s history says, “Lord why did you appoint us to be the watchmen why did we have to stand on the city walls? We’ve tried to tell the people and they won’t listen to us. God had told Jeremiah you are not to marry or to have children, why, so I can get across a message to people who aren’t going to listen to you anyway? Ezekiel you are going to lose your wife and that’s going to be a sign to the people of the grief they are going to experience and they are going to be too busy to even mourn. Yet I’m going to send that message to the people and they aren’t going to listen any way but I’m going to take your wife away from you.

As they think of those difficulties, and as Jeremiah is dealing with those difficulties, that is a part of why he’s crying out to God in these confessions. “Lord you have been like a deceptive brook to me. Lord you have deceived me and have overpowered me. I didn’t have any choice in the matter, I had to preach your word.

When I think of the difficulties and the people struggling with God in ministry as they try to help lead others to God I’m also reminded of the prophet Elijah. After the great victory on Mount Carmel, the defeat of the prophets of Baal and the fire that comes down from heaven and consumes the sacrifice and the altar, Jezebel in chapter 19 wants to put Elijah to death for putting to death her prophets to Baal. It says out of fear for his life Elijah ran and fled. He goes the length of the land and he comes to the place where he says to God, “Lord take my life I’ve had enough, I’m ready to die.” Well, someone has said if that’s really what Elijah had wanted he could have stayed there and allowed Jezebel to do God’s work for him. But it’s a reminder to us of the struggles of ministry and the realities of ministry. Jeremiah is going through that as well as he’s thrown into cisterns. He’s put into prison as he’s accused of being a traitor as he’s called a liar
as he’s kidnapped and taken away as there are people who say Jeremiah needs to

die as a false prophet because of the things he’s said about God’s house. He’s

living through the days of exile. Jeremiah is expressing the hurt of a Moses or the

hurt of an Elijah, that’s what ministry’s like.

We developed in chapter one that in the time of Jeremiah’s call that in a
sense he is a second Moses. Remember in chapter 1, “but Lord I don’t know how
to speak, I’m but a child. Don’t worry Jeremiah I will put my words within you”
Moses says, “Lord I don’t know how to speak I don’t know what to say I’m not
gifted; I’m not elegant. The Lord says, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll put my words in you.’”

Jeremiah is a second Moses. In the same way that Moses was forbidden to enter
the promise land and he lived primarily with the generation that would experience
God’s judgment those 40 years in the wilderness, Jeremiah is going to end up his
life is going to be spent in its last days outside the land in Egypt in the place where
God had delivered the people in the days of Moses. Just like Moses he would be
part of a generation where all of them but two select individuals would die and not
be allowed to enter in the promise land. Jeremiah says its going to be 70 years
before the exile is over and the return from exile is going to be after I’m dead and
gone. He’s a second Moses and that’s behind these prayers as Jeremiah is

struggling with God.

What I’d like to do is to walk through these prayers where they are in there
context in Jeremiah and just how they reflect the difficulties that Jeremiah is
having with God and with his circumstances. The first prayer chapter 11, verse 18
is: “The Lord made it known to me and I have known that you showed me their
deeds but I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was
against me they devised schemes saying let us destroy the tree with the fruit, let us
cut him off from the land of the living so that his name might be remembered no
more. Lord I didn’t know what I was getting into” I didn’t know that the people
were going to want to put me to death.” So he says to the Lord, verse 20 “O Lord,
of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see your
vengeance upon them, for to you I committed my cause.” Lord, I believe that you are just. I didn’t know I was going to have to go through all of this.” So he prays for God to judge the people.

God is going to respond back to him in his confession in verse 21 chapter 11, here is the response of God to the prayer of Jeremiah. He doesn’t say, “Well, Jeremiah you need to love your enemies and forgive them and practice a little more Christian love here. The Lord says this to Jeremiah, “Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the men of Anathoth who seek your life and who say do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hand.” Some of the people who were persecuting Jeremiah were his own family members in the tiny village of Anathoth. “We don’t like your message either.” Therefore, thus says the Lord “I will punish them. The young men shall die by the sword, their sons and their daughters will die by famine, and none of them shall be left. For I will bring disaster upon the men of Anathoth, the year of their punishment.” So here we have Jeremiah says, “Lord, I’m being persecuted; I’m being oppressed. Let me see your vengeance on them.” It turns out that God is announcing judgment on are the very people in Jeremiah’s own home town. Jesus said “a prophet is without honor” the only place a prophet doesn’t get honor is in their own town. And that’s true of Jeremiah as well. God’s going to deal with this problem. The Lord gives him an answer.

However, the next thing we read in the book chapter 12 verse 1 is Jeremiah’s next lament there is nothing in between. We have Jeremiah’s complaint; we have God’s response. But then chapter 12 verse 1 comes right back at God: “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? You plant them, and they take root; they grow and produce fruit.” Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? I want to know. Someone has suggested that literarily by the second lament coming immediately right after the first lament it almost conveys the sense that Jeremiah’s
gotten an answer from God that the Lord’s going to judge the people.

Jeremiah’s not happy that God is not doing it fast enough. So he wants God to act. So “I know you said you were going to deal with this, do it now.” How long with the land mourn, O Lord, and the grass of every field wither? For the evil of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away.” Look at what the wickedness of the land is doing to the land itself, God do something about this.

Again, the Lord is going to immediately answer Jeremiah’s prayers. Wouldn’t it be nice if we immediately would get an answer to our prayers but again Jeremiah prays and God answers chapter 11, that’s what’s also going to take place here in verse 5. Here’s his response, “If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan? For even the your brothers and the house of your father, even though they have dealt treacherously with you; they are in full cry after you; do not believe them.” The Lord now instead of simply saying look Jeremiah understand I’m going to deal with this problem I’m going to avenge you and deal with the people, the Lord’s going to say back to him, “Jeremiah do you understand what you’re asking? You’re praying for me to help you through this and your circumstances and your situation is unbearable but in a sense in your ministry you’ve been running with men on foot, your about to get into a race with horses, are you going to be able to withstand? The difficulties that you’ve experienced up to this point in your ministry, are nothing compared to what you’re about to experience. Now there is almost a hint of rebuke in what the Lord is saying to him, the first passage I’m in trouble the wicked are evil God’s response he is going to judge them. Immediately the second lament, God your not acting fast enough, wait a minute Jeremiah you don’t know how bad things are going to get.

So we go to the third lament in chapter 15. This is our passage where Jeremiah is going to say in verse 18. This is the verse that in all of these laments that stands out to me: “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing
to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” Now we saw a couple of lessons ago that there’s accusatory language toward God in 60 different psalms in the book of Psalms. We saw that Jeremiah’s words in some sense are not that different than what Job says. He doesn’t curse God but he gets awful close. And we wonder here, how close is Jeremiah to crossing the line? I’m not sure I can answer that. God allows the prophet an answer to the prayer but the Lord does respond to the statement with a rebuke to Jeremiah. Here’s what he says in verse 19, “Therefore thus says the Lord: If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them.”

There are a couple of things that I want to notice in that chapter in that verse there is a word of rebuke here a prophet can come to him can vent his frustrations. He can express his accusations. He complained and argued but at this point God steps in and there is a word of rebuke. The word of rebuke that is found there is the word shuv and its prominent that’s the word Jeremiah tells the people all throughout the book. You need to shuv, you need to return; you need to repent; you need to come back to God. Well, what happens here is that in this particular situation God says to the prophet, “you are the one who needs to shuv. If you will return [shuv] then I will restore you. If you return, Jeremiah, it’s ok if you want to come to me and express feeling that I have been a deceitful brook. That’s ok I can handle that but if you stay at this place in your spiritual life; if you stay in this place on this perspective on my calling that I’ve placed before you then you are not going to be able to serve as my messenger. If you want to stand before me as a prophet shuv and come back and realize what I have called you to do.

Then the word shuv is used again at the end of the verse remember Jeremiah’s role he’s standing between the people and God. He’s representing God to the people and the people to God but as a prophet always as it comes down to it he always sides with God rather than the people.

So the Lord says to him, “they shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to
them. In this mediatorial thing you are doing you can’t simply go over to the side of the people and side with them and accuse me of being an empty brook. You ultimately need to continue your ministry so they will turn to you and I will ultimately make you strong, make you like the bronze wall and the fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you, but I will prevail.” The Lord is going to do the things that he promised to do for Jeremiah in chapter 1

What I want us to understand is that the laments and confessions are an expression in some ways of even the broken relationship between God and the prophet or the relationship that’s about to be broken because of all this covenantal upheaval going on in Jeremiah’s life and times. This is a serious thing. So chapter 15, verse 20, the Lord promises him, “I will make you to these people a fortified wall of bronze they will fight against you but they will not prevail over you, for I am with you, to save you and deliver you,’ declares the Lord.” There’s a promise.

In the first lament chapters 18 to 23 there is an immediate promise the Lord is going to deal with the men of Anathoth that are seeking your life, the Lord knows what’s going on. Chapter 12 Jeremiah comes right back to God this time Jeremiah you’ve run with men, your about to run with horses its going to get worse. Jeremiah 15 another answer from God that is both a rebuke and promise, “Jeremiah you have got to return to me and remember I’ve made some promises I’m going to deliver you. Verse 21 closing out this lament “I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and I will redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.” Look, I know what your going through. When we come to the prayers that are in chapter 17, and chapters 18 and 20, I want you to notice that there is something missing. First of all chapter 17 verses 14 to 18 says this “Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me, and I shall be saved.” Jeremiah in these confessions has not abandoned his faith. He’s not praying out these negative things because he has turned his back. He’s asking God to act in accordance to his covenant in a sense he’s asking because he believes not because he doesn’t believe.

“Behold, they say to me, ‘Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come!”
They’re challenging, “if you say God going to bring judgment let it fall.” “I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness you know what came out of your lips it was before your face. Be not a terror to me. You are my refuge in the day of disaster. Let those be put to shame who persecute me but me not be put to shame. Let them be dismayed but let me not be dismayed. Bring upon them the day of disaster destroy them with double destruction.” He’s praying for the judgment of the people but what I want us to notice is what he’s saying about God. In one part of this prayer, heal me, save me, deliver me, and you are my praise. In another part of the prayer, Lord you are a terror to me, because of this calling when I represent God to the people and represent the people to God. Here’s the interesting thing in the confession of chapter 17 that isn’t in the three that came before it, we come to verse 18, “bring upon them the day of disaster, destroy them with double destruction.” There is no response from God. The next thing we read is: “Thus says the Lord, go and stand in the Peoples’ Gate. Time to go preach another sermon there is no direct response to the prayer of Jeremiah.

Chapter 18, verses 19 to 23, let me read this lament “Hear me, O Lord, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for my life.” It is the same thing we’ve seen before. Look at what these people have done to me. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them to turn them away from your wrath. God I did what you wanted me to do I came to shuv them, to help them to turn away from your wrath and to turn back to God.” Therefore deliver up their children to famine give them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives become childless and widowed.”

All these terrible things are going to come upon them verse 23: “Yet you, O Lord, know all of their plotting to me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger.” What do you think God is going to say to that? Just like in chapter 17 there is no direct response to Jeremiah’s prayer. Chapter 19, verse 1,
“Thus says the Lord, ‘Go, buy a potter’s earthenware flask,’ I’ve got another sermon for you to preach. There is no answer to Jeremiah’s prayer.

Chapter 20, verses 7-8 “O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I am, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me.” It’s all about the calling that’s the source of his suffering. He’s not suffering because he disobeyed God; he’s suffering because he obeyed God directly. Jeremiah wants to stop preaching and it looks like is he going to end his ministry.

But then comes to a place in verse 11 here as often happens in the psalms in the midst of lament he expresses his confidence and his trust in the Lord. He says in verse 11, “But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.” Here he’s confident that God’s going to help him, Lord you’re the warrior that goes out in front of me. You fight my battles. If you’re going into misery knowing that God is going out with you as a dread warrior to fight your battles that’s a good thing to know. Being reminded that the Lord of hosts is the Lord of armies who does what is just and righteous and tests the hearts and minds that is a good thing to know.

For Jeremiah, there is finally this word of praise where we haven’t seen too much of this. Jeremiah says, “Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.” We think great! The relationship between God and the prophet has finally been healed. We’ve got this great word of praise that’s the end of the confessions! However, listen to verse 14, “Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day that my mother bore me, let is let it not be blessed!” Alright, “Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord!” in verse 13. Yet verse 14 is: “Curse the day that I was born.” We are right back to lament in the last words Jeremiah prays in his confessions.” Why did I come out from the
womb to see toil and sorrow and to spend all of my days in shame.” What’s God’s reaction, what’s God’s response and again there is no response by God in chapter 20.

Next thing we read chapter 21, verse 1, this is the word that Jeremiah got from the Lord, time to go preach another sermon. In the last three of the five laments there is no answer from God, no response from God. Have you ever prayed a prayer and not gotten an answer or not gotten a response from God? We all have. Lord why are you silent. There are times we all sense, my prayers have not gone any higher than the ceiling God where are you, Lord where are you. Jeremiah is going through those things. Jeremiah is wondering at times did I make the right vocational choice when he called me. I think God was like a deceptive brook and he overwhelmed me, I made a choice I wish I could have done something else. There has been a fragmented relationship not just between God and the people but the relationship between God and Jeremiah is frayed at the edges as well.

This prayer where Jeremiah is praying for God to save him and is God is going to answer that prayer, absolutely, in chapter 39 and in chapter 40 where the city of Jerusalem is captured and when Jerusalem is destroyed. Jeremiah has been kept in prison and the Babylonians come into town. They are the ones that deliver him out of prison. So Jeremiah is praying for deliverance in chapter 11 and chapter 12, chapter 15, chapter 17, chapter 18, chapter 20, but there is no direct answer to that prayer however until chapter 39. There is a lot of stuff between chapter 20 and chapter 39. There’s going to be prison; there’s going to be accusations; he’s going to be thrown in the dungeon; there’s going to be the reality of the exile; there’s going to be the horrors of an enemy siege; there are going to be false prophets that call Jeremiah a liar; there will be people that stand at the temple and say that he should be put to death; there’s a king name Jehoiakim that wants to kill him and cut up his skull and all of that stuff. “Lord save me and deliver me” is that going to happen? Yes. But will it happen right away? No.
In all of these difficulties and the struggle of ministry there’s some good pastoral theology to work through as we do this. Jeremiah in his confessions is speaking from God to the people, but he’s also speaking from himself as an individual to God. Then finally, the last piece of this as we look at the confessions he’s representing himself before God and all of the unfairness and the injustices. But remember that Jeremiah is also representing the people as a whole. There’s no question he’s on God’s side, he’s God’s messenger, but Jeremiah is a human being. Jeremiah is one of the people. Jeremiah as a human being is going to live through the condition of siege and exile, being a righteous person doesn’t give him an exemption from that.

So sometimes as part of this group of people this nation, that is experiencing God’s wrath and God’s judgment, Jeremiah is going to cry out to God and say, “Lord, I’ve done my job of telling the people what you feel about this. Let me do my job of also telling you what the people are going through as a result of this.” And sometimes we think of the people of Judah at this time and we think they deserved what they got. They worshipped idols, they sacrificed their children, they set up Tophets, they followed after the Baals, they did all of these things. They were hard hearted; they did not listen to the Lord. It said in one place they didn’t even blush when confronted with their sin. They got what they deserved.

But another part of this is that we see the story of this as a graphic tragedy in all of the Bible the destruction of a nation of people and even though they would not repent and even though they would not mourn over their sin they are going to come to a place where they mourn over their suffering. We’ve seen the mourning and the suffering of the prophet for God, let me talk about the weeping of the people throughout the book. Jeremiah is picturing the invasion of the land in chapter 4-6. In chapter 4, verse 31, here’s the weeping and the mourning, here’s what Judah is going to experience as they’re going through this exile. Jeremiah says, “I have heard a cry as of a women in labor, anguish as of one giving birth to
her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, ‘Woe is me I am fainting before murderers.’” So think about Jerusalem in this way. They are God’s virgin daughter and they are about to give birth to a child and the pains of childbirth is ceasing. The city of Jerusalem we should feel compassion for them. Yes, they are sinners they’re rebels, they’ve broken the covenant but they’re going through a terrible tragedy. So Jeremiah’s weeping often is for what the people themselves are experiencing and going through. He’s expressing that grief to God as much as he’s expressing the Lord’s grief to Israel.

Chapter 6, verse 26, “O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes; make mourning as for an only son, most bitter lamentation, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us.” This is going to be a terrible thing. Chapter 8, verses 18-22 is more about the mourning of the people, Jeremiah says, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me my heart is sick within me.” He is talking about God’s anger here in verse 19 he says, “Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: ‘Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her?’” Jeremiah says I’m grieving for the people because they thought God’s in the land, God’s going to save us, and God’s going to protect us. We might look at this and say you know what, they got what they deserved, they’ve presumed on God’s grace but Jeremiah says they were looking for God’s deliverance and it never came. The people say in verse 20, “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.” What happened? “For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.”

Look, these people are grieving over the fact they thought he was going to deliver them. Jeremiah doesn’t laugh at them and say look you got what you deserve because of your bad theology or because of your evil lifestyle. Jeremiah grieves over that. I’m reminded as a pastor that when I talk to people about God’s judgment I need that same heart and that same attitude. Chapter 9, verse 17 describes the degree of Judah’s mourning, the Lord says to the people, “Consider, and call for the mourning women to come; send for the skillful women to come;
let them make haste and raise a wailing over us, that our eyes may run down with tears and raise a wailing over us, that our eyes may run down with tears and our eyelids flow with water. For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion: ‘How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings.’” They wouldn’t come to a place where they would weep over their sin but even as sinful rebels they would weep over their exile. Jeremiah says you know what, as God’s messenger I weep with them. He calls for the professional mourning women and this was a custom that sometimes in times of grief or lament people would actually come and they were professionals at this. It’s time for that in Judah because of the natural disaster and calamity they are experiencing.

Verse 21 says, “For death has come into our windows; it is entered into our palaces, it is cutting off the children from the streets and the young men from the squares and the young men from the squares. Speak: ‘Thus declares the Lord, ‘The dead bodies of men shall fall like dung on the open field, like sheaves after the reaper and none will gather them.’” Imagine the dead bodies that are scattered through the land. What’s the response? Grief. Not simply the idea, well they were sinners they got what they deserved, Jeremiah is expressing the grief, the sadness, the mourning, the hurt of the people. He’s presenting that and putting that for God, so God can be reminded and so God will act in accordance with that.

Now here’s another complicating factor in all of this Jeremiah as he’s praying, is not simply representing the people as a whole but think about a specific group of people that are going through the horrors of the exile there are righteous people in Jerusalem that are going to be affected by the invading army just as much as the wicked. Now Ezekiel chapter 9 says that before the judgment comes the Lord goes out into the city with an angel and he puts a mark on the head of those who mourn over their sin, and who know him. In some sense, there is a kind of protection here. We see protection in the book of Jeremiah given to people like Baruch and Jeremiah and Ebed Melek and others who go through the exile and
believe and God says I’m going to preserve your life. That promise wasn’t
necessarily true for all of the righteous, there were righteous people who died in
the streets of Jerusalem. There were righteous people who died in battle with the
Babylonians there were righteous women who lost their sons and daughters, or
who perhaps were taken as prisoners of war. What about them?

In a sense the prayer of Jeremiah as he’s praying for God to deliver him as
a righteous person are prayers that are being expressed for the righteous people in
general. I believe that last function and the last section of the laments of Jeremiah
is that these prayers will become models of prayer for the Jewish exiles
themselves as they pray for God to deliver them. Jeremiah’s confidence in the
Lord that he would deliver them that can be their confidence. Jeremiah’s prayers
that the Lord would avenge the wicked who have mistreated him are the prayers of
the people in Psalm 137 “O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, blessed
are those who take your babies and dash them against the rocks.” They’re praying
the prayers of Jeremiah. Psalm 74 and Psalm 79, look at what these people have
done to the Lord’s sanctuary and to the Lord’s people, God deal with them. The
words that Jeremiah prayed heal me, save me, be a refuge for me, were the words
that the exiles themselves could pray. Chapter 30 in the Book of Consolation the
Lord is going to heal the wound of the people of Israel. So these are not just
Jeremiah’s prayers. As the people are sent away into exile as righteous people
suffer injustice themselves they can begin to pray these prayers to God as the
exiles begin to seek God with their whole heart how do we come back to him?
What do we say? Here’s a model the prayers of Jeremiah himself. The deliverance
of Jeremiah as he prayed in chapter 20 and then went through all of the adversity
leading to the deliverance that came in chapter 40 it’s a reminder to Israel, you
may go through terrible suffering but I will deliver you in the same way that I have
delivered my prophet.

A last example of this is I think in many ways in the prayers of Jeremiah we
see an echo of them in the prayers of Lamentations. Jewish tradition has attributed
this book to Jeremiah whether Jeremiah’s the author or not I’m not sure that we can be confident about that but as you hear the prayers of Lamentations you hear the echo’s of Jeremiah’s confessions. We acknowledge our sin but Lord look at how much we’ve suffered. It’s time for it to end. Jeremiah prays, “Lord you’re a dread warrior with me, the people say great is your faithfulness, O Lord we know that you are going to deliver us.” Jeremiah’s prayers become a model for the exiles themselves so that they will be able to pray. As they call out to God as they pray for deliverance and the promise is ultimately they will experience deliverance in the same way that Jeremiah has.

We’ve spent some time over the last three sessions on Jeremiah’s confessions looking at them as model prayers, looking at them at revelation of God’s heart for the people, looking at them as reflections of Jeremiah’s struggles in ministry, and then finally looking at them as expressions of what the people can say to God in their difficulty and in their suffering. These are not just prayers that reflect Jeremiah and God they are prayers that represent Jeremiah’s role and standing between God representing God to Israel and representing Israel to God.

Transcribed by Danielle Kunis
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
We are continuing to focus on Jeremiah chapters 11-20. We spent some time dealing with the confessions of Jeremiah and the laments of Jeremiah that are in this section. In some ways the laments are not only reflecting the struggles of Jeremiah, but they are also a reflection of the unraveling of the covenant that’s taking place in Jeremiah chapters 11 to 20. In this section, and in this session, we are going to focus more on Jeremiah sign-acts that are also showing us how the covenant between God and Judah is unraveling, and how Jeremiah is again trying to portray this in a way that the people can’t miss what he’s saying. This section, chapter 11-20, is introduced by a prose sermon that sets forth the primary theme of this section: the covenant between God and Judah has been broken and, as a result of this, God is going to bring judgment.

Broken Covenant Idea

Let me remind you of chapter 11:10 and the trajectory of this that’s going to be traced throughout the entire section, the Lord says, “The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I have made with their fathers. Therefore, thus says the Lord, behold, I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them.”

We’ve suggested a couple of times that the prose sermons are the ways that Jeremiah often is going to summarize or introduce key themes that pull together all of the other things that are going on in that section. So I believe Jeremiah 11 is introducing the idea of covenant brokenness, the unraveling of the covenant at the seams. That’s going to be a key focus in chapters 11-20.

We see that in the laments of Jeremiah in the sense that the prophet is caught in the middle of this. He is not allowed to pray for the people. He begins to stop God’s judgment even when God tells him not to pray for the people. He
still does, but God will not listen to his confession. So the relationship between God and Israel is coming apart at the seams. We also see this in a number of prophetic sign-acts that Jeremiah is going to perform throughout the book, but some of those sign-acts are concentrated in this particular section of the book of Jeremiah.

Function of Prophetic Sign-Acts

Now a sign-act, let me define that, what are we talking about? A sign-act is where the prophet is going to make a type of non-verbal communication where, in a more dramatic way, he is actually going to act out the message. We’ve talked about in the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah doesn’t just preach the word of God, in a sense he becomes the word of God in his person. Another way that that’s reflected in the book is that Jeremiah is not simply going to preach the message, he is going to act it out. We also see this in the preaching of the prophet Ezekiel, and we’re going to look at some examples there.

Kelvin Friebal has written an excellent dissertation talking about the prophetic sign-acts in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The point that he makes is that some people have tried to portray this as the prophet magically acting out something that he believes simply by acting it. He has the power to affect this by the action itself. So this becomes sort of a magical way of making the message come to pass. Friebal says that’s not really the key idea or the reason why the prophets are doing these sign-acts. They’re not magically trying to make this happen by these particular actions. It is a powerful form of non-verbal communication where the prophet is making sure that the people do not just hear the message, they also see it. We’ve seen the statistics about when we hear something, the percentage that we’re likely to retain that. When we hear something and see it, the tendency to remember that, for it to be more vivid in our minds, the percentage is increased. In many ways, you also have to remember the prophets are confronting people with messages where these people are yawning. “We’ve heard these messages of judgments, our fathers have passed them onto us. We’ve heard about the other
prophets in Israel and they’re marriages.” They tend to yawn, and the prophets by both preaching the message and then acting it out are making sure that the people can’t just pass it off. They can’t just yawn and say we’ve heard all this before. The prophet in the sense is going to get in their face. He’s going to act the message out and it’s going to make that message more powerful.

Buried Loincloth (Jer 13)

In Jeremiah 11-20, there are some important sign-acts that convey the reality of the broken covenant between God and Israel. The first one of those is the sign-act of the buried loincloth. Jeremiah is the prophet who buries his underwear and a very effective way of conveying the message of the broken covenant between God and his people Judah.

Let me read the account here: God says to Jeremiah in chapter 13:1, “‘Go and buy a linen loin cloth, and put it around your waist, and do not dip it in water.’ So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the Lord, and put it around my waist. And the word of the Lord came to me a second time, ‘Take the loincloth that you have bought, which is around your waist and arise, go to the Euphrates and hide it there in the cleft of the rock. So I went and hid it by the Euphrates as the Lord commanded me. And after many days the Lord said to me, ‘Arise and got to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there.’” Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where it was hidden it. And behold, the loincloth was spoiled; and it was not good for it was good for nothing. Then the word of the Lord came to me: ‘Thus says the Lord: Even so will I spoil the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart, and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing.’”

So yes, Jeremiah is the prophet who buries his underwear. There are a couple of issues that come up. First of all, the Zondervan Illustrated Commentary on the background of Jeremiah tries to depict for us what this particular piece of
clothing might have looked like. There’s a Canaanite depiction of linen or a waist belt like this that simply is a garment that is wrapped around the waist and worn in that particular way. There’s an Egyptian piece of art though that portrays the Syrians who were wearing strips of cloth that overlap and that actually passes through the legs. So there’s a couple of different possibilities. I don’t know that there’s a lot of great theological significance in trying to determine: did Jeremiah wear boxers or briefs? That’s not really relevant, but that gives us a little bit of background.

What does happen here, and what the sign-act is all about, is that Jeremiah is commanded to wear this linen waistcloth close to his body and then to take this to another location, to bury it in some rocks and then, after an extended period of time, after many days; to go back, and to dig up this ruined waistcloth. You can imagine what this looks like after he has worn it, he hasn’t washed it, he buries it. You can imagine what this garment looks like.

Euphrates?

Then the sign-act involves him taking this ruined loincloth, holding it in front of the people, and saying this is what you look like in the eyes of God. Now in the ESV, as I’ve read this, it says that God commanded Jeremiah to go to the Euphrates and that was to be the place where Jeremiah was to bury this waistcloth. The problem with that is that this would’ve involved a journey somewhere around 300 or over 300 miles. It doesn’t seem likely that God would have asked Jeremiah to not only make this trip once, but twice, to make this long trip to bury this garment. It’s possible that the Hebrew words here, parah, could instead be understood to a reference of the Euphrates that’s 350 miles away, it could be a place called “Parah,” which is mentioned in a couple of places in the Old Testament, and is only about 4 miles northwest of Anathoth, Jeremiah’s hometown. So instead of the Euphrates, we probably have a reference to Parah.

Discussion of the Lioncloth (Jer 13)

So he goes to Parah a few miles away, he buries it, comes back at a later
time, and then holds this cloth up in front of the people and reminds them, this is what God thinks of you. The punch line of the sign-act is given to us in verse 11. It says “For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me declares the Lord, that they might be from me, a people, a name, and a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen.” So there’s a little bit more to this then simply a prophet holding up his holey underwear and telling the people that this reflects their ruined condition.

First of all, the loincloth was made out of linen. The loincloth was made out of an expensive fine piece of material. Linen was the material that was used for the garments of the priest, Leviticus chapter 16. So we may have a representation of the fact that by linen, this is representing the priestly status of the people of Israel. Israel not only had Levites that served as priests, they, as a nation, were called, Exodus chapter 19, “a kingdom of priests.” In the same way that there were consecration rituals for the priest, when Israel entered into the covenant with the Lord, the Lord sprinkled blood on them and consecrated them. As a people, he was designating them as his priests. The linen, perhaps, is a representation of that.

God also brought these people into a close intimate relationship. The loincloth, this waistcloth, is something that is worn close to the body. So this reflects the fact that God had a very close, personal relationship with the people of Israel. It says, in fact, in verse 11, “As the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I have made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord.” The verb they choose there is the word davaq. And it reminds us of Genesis chapter 2:24, a man and a woman as they enter into the marriage relationship, they cling, davaq, to one another. The young man abandons his father and mother and he clings or he cleaves, he davaqs to his wife and they become one flesh. The Lord had brought Israel into that type of intimate relationship with himself. The loincloth represents that as well.

But the end of this process, in spite of the linen material, in spite of the
priestly status of Israel, in spite of the fact that this garment was worn close to the body, the ultimate significance of this is the ruined condition of the loincloth. It is gross as Jeremiah brings it back. It is a reflection of what Judah had become to the Lord. It says that God had designed Israel to be a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. They were to reflect God’s glory to the nations. They were to attract and to magnify and to exalt God so that these other nations would want to worship him. When someone looks at this ruined loincloth, there’s no way that they would find that attractive. As Judah went through this experience where they were attacked by the Babylonians, they were reduced to poverty, to cannibalism, to all the terrible things that were happening, there was nothing about this that was attractive.

Spiritually and psychologically at the point of existence, Judah had become a ruined nation. You can see how the sign-act, the visual demonstration of the ruined loincloth represents that much more effectively, than simply the prophet preaching this message himself. He holds up the loincloth. You can see this is what God thinks of you, and it makes the words and the message even more effective.

Wine Jar as a Sign-Act?

Now there’s some discussion of this, but we may also have a sign-act that follows. In chapter 13, verses 12-14, we’re not sure if Jeremiah here is simply using a proverb or whether there’s a visual demonstration that goes along with this. But listen to what he says in 13, 12-14, also reflecting the ruined condition of Judah, the broken covenant, and the fact that they no longer can fulfill the purpose that God is given to them. Verse 12 says this: “You shall speak to them this word. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Every jar should be filled with wine.’” So possibly we have a sign-act here. This seems to be maybe a proverbial statement or something like that, perhaps it’s a quotation. “Every jar shall be filled with wine.” Possibly the prophet brings a flask or a jar or maybe even a wine skin that contains wine. He holds it up in front of the people and it grabs their attention. A
prophet is not just going to give us an oracle, he’s got a message about a wine flask here. What’s he going to tell us? He begins with the statement that says, “Every jar shall be filled with wine.” The people are going to respond back to him.

It seems kind of obvious and that’s what the people are going to say back. They will say to you, “Do we not indeed know that every jar will be filled with wine?” It’s almost as if they are saying, “Duh, we understand. The purpose of a wine flask is to contain wine.” Jeremiah, you’re not telling us anything that we didn’t know. But there were those still wondering as the prophet possibly is holding this flask, “What’s he going to say?” And he begins with this sort of obvious statement that annoys them a little bit, but the flask raises some questions. Wine would normally make us think about at least refreshment. It would make us think about a festive occasion, a celebration.

But the wine jar is going to represent something else and here’s the punch line. After they say to Jeremiah, “Don’t you think that we know and understand that every jar should be filled with wine?” “Then you shall say to them, thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I will fill with drunkenness all the inhabitants of this land: the kings who sit on David’s throne, the priests, the prophets, and all of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.’” This is not going to be a positive sign. The flask of wine at this point is not representing refreshment or celebration or marriage or harvest time when the people would get together to celebrate. The wine flask in this case is representing judgment. The people are about to become intoxicated with the strong powerful judgment of God that’s going to overwhelm them. And just like a person that’s drunk, they’re going to stagger under the weight of this judgment.

The prophet uses wine in a similar way in Jeremiah chapter 25 when he talks about Judah drinking the cup of the wine of God’s judgment and all of the other nations as well. Maybe in that particular situation he may have performed another sign-act. He may have held the cup of wine up, and again, the people are thinking that he’s about to raise a toast and a celebration or something like that’s
being signified. Instead, he talks about the intoxicating power of God’s judgment. This wine doesn’t represent something joyful. It’s something negative.

And then it says this, verse 14, “And I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, declares the Lord. I will not pity or spare them or have compassion, that I should not destroy them.” And as the people are drunk, they will become like a wine flask that are banged against one another and they’re ultimately going to break and be smashed and we really have the same point that’s made with the ruined loincloth.

The purpose that the object is made will not be carried out. The loincloth was designed to be worn close to the body; it’s become a ruined garment. Judah was designed to live in a close relationship with God and reflect his glory and his name and his honor to the nations. By their sin, they can’t fulfill that purpose. A wine flask was made to carry wine. It had a purpose. But these wine flasks are going to be smashed together because of the drunkenness that God is going to bring on the people. Again, they will not fulfill their purpose.

So, we’re not sure if there’s an actual sign-act carried out in Chapter 13:12-14 or not, but we can imagine that perhaps as he’s preaching this message, Jeremiah is going to hold up this flask of wine and it’s going to create a question that the people will ask about. It’s going to peak their interest, it’s going to make the message even more noteworthy in their minds.

Survey of Sign-Acts in Jeremiah

Now these are the beginnings of several sign-acts that are going to be carried out throughout the book of Jeremiah where again the prophet is going to do everything he possibly can do to make sure that the people hear the message. The message that God is preparing to send judgment against them is so urgent that the prophet will go to any extreme. He will take any desperate measure that is necessary to make sure that the people hear the message. So let me survey some of these other sign-acts that are used in the book of Jeremiah. Most of the time they are used to convey a message of judgment. There are going to be some
occasions and situations where a sign-act will be used to indicate something positive.

Visit to the Potter’s House

The next sign-act, and we’re going to talk about this and focus on this one a little bit more, are the sign-acts that are involved with Jeremiah’s two visits to the potter in chapters 18 and 19. In the same way that this sign-act about the jar of wine involves pottery, we’re going to see a sign act involving that in chapters 18 and 19 as well.

Jeremiah’s Yoke

The next one is found in Jeremiah chapter 27. Jeremiah goes out into the streets of Jerusalem to tell the people about the judgment that’s coming, that God is going to put them under bondage to Babylon. And again, to make that message more visible, to make that message more powerful and impactful on the people, Jeremiah doesn’t just preach the message, he symbolizes the message by wearing an animal yoke on his neck and his shoulders as he’s preaching the message. So Jeremiah isn’t just saying, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Look! You’re about to go into bondage to Babylon,’ hear the word of the Lord.” Jeremiah is carrying this yoke and maybe under the weight of it, he’s walking around with this wooden yoke telling the people that they are going to be placed in bondage to Babylon. And this animal yoke effectively symbolizes their political subjugation to Babylon. So I think this is a message that the people would definitely be talking about after it was over, “Did you see what Jeremiah did today?”

Buying Hanamel’s Field in Anathoth

Jeremiah chapter 32, we have a positive sign act where Jeremiah is going to buy back, to redeem family property from his cousin, Hanamel. Hanamel had to sell this property and Old Testament law, Leviticus 25, said that when a family member had to sell property, because of debt or some other reason, it was the responsibility of other family members to help that person out by buying back the property. Property was to stay in the same family hands because that was their
heritage from the Lord. So, Jeremiah is fulfilling a legal responsibility that is laid out in the law, but this particular action becomes a sign-act as well because Jeremiah buys this property just before the time that the Babylonians are about to capture the land and send the people of Judah away into exile.

In light of the political circumstances of that day, it really didn’t make sense for Jeremiah to buy the land. He was fulfilling what Leviticus 25 said, but if the Babylonians are coming to take the land, why should he bother with this? But Jeremiah very carefully purchases the land. Baruch carefully writes out these two documents attesting that Jeremiah has ownership of the land, that it’s passing back into the family. The purpose of this was to convey to the people the hope that they would return to the land and that the land would once again become theirs. If Babylon is going to end up possessing this land permanently, there is no reason to buy back the field. There is no reason to go through this legal process where Jeremiah is establishing proper ownership of the land, but it was an effective way, not just for the prophet to say, “Look the Lord is going to bring us back, the Lord is going to restore our fortunes!” This particular act is impressed upon the people in a visual way, the hope of returning from exile.

Burying Stones in Egypt

We have another sign-act in Jeremiah chapter 43. And this was a sign-act that was performed to the Jewish refugees who had taken Jeremiah to Egypt. They had gone to Egypt because they were attempting to avoid reprisals from the Babylonians for the assassination of Gedaliah. They believed that by going to Egypt, by changing their geographical location, they could get away from Nebuchadnezzar. More importantly, they believed that they could escape the consequences of Judah’s sinful choices over the past years. Jeremiah reminded them that going to Egypt is not going to help you because God is going to judge the Egyptians in the same way that he’s judged Judah. Nebuchadnezzar is going to bring his armies to Egypt in the same way he marched upon Judah. I am going to give the king of Egypt into the hand of Babylon in the same way that I gave the
king of Judah. We know that later on, even though Nebuchadnezzar did not conquer Egypt, he did invade there.

To make that message vivid and real, and again, because he’s dealing with people that are hard hearted and rebellious and who don’t want to really listen to what the prophet says, he’s going to do something to make sure that he gets their attention. It tells us that Jeremiah goes to the place at the entrance of Pharaoh's house, Tahpanhes, in Egypt. And I’m not sure exactly how he carried this out, but Jeremiah is actually going to dig up the pavement at the entrance to Pharaoh's house and he is going to bury stones in the ground there. What those stones represent are the foundations of the throne of Nebuchadnezzar that will be placed there when Nebuchadnezzar comes into the land. I can imagine him bringing the people out, showing them, look, this is where Nebuchadnezzar is going to establish his authority. Hopefully he did this at a time when the Egyptians didn’t exactly know what was going on either as it’s a pretty subversive thing. But Jeremiah wants them not just to hear the message but to see it.

Scroll and Rock Cast into Euphrates

We have the final sign-act carried out in context with the ministry of Jeremiah in Jeremiah chapter 51. This particular sign-act is carried out by Seraiah, who was a scribe that appears to be the brother of Jeremiah’s primary scribe, Baruch. Seraiah goes with Zedekiah to Babylon at a time when Zedekiah is required to report there by the Babylonians and he pronounces and he proclaims the messages of judgment that Jeremiah has preached about Babylon. These particular judgments about Babylon, the prophets’ messages, are on a separate scroll. Seraiah takes that scroll with him and then after reading it, it says that he takes the scroll, he ties a rock to it, and he throws the scroll into the Euphrates River signifying through the reading of that message and the carrying out of that act, the final judgment of Babylon. Babylon was going to be destroyed, never to rise again. Babylon was like that scroll that was tied to a rock, that was doomed and never going to rise again.
So the prophets’ message taught about the destruction of Babylon. The sign-act demonstrated it in a more vivid way. This preaching is related to the fact that the people that Jeremiah is ministering to, throughout the context of his ministry have hard hearts. It’s like trying to get through to little children, so sometimes with little children, the best way to get them a message, is not just to tell them something, but to act it out. That’s what the prophets were doing.

Sign-Acts in the Other Prophets: Isaiah

Now we have other examples in the prophetic books and I’ll mention a couple of these, of other prophets that performed some pretty interesting sign-acts to demonstrate and to vividly act out their message. In Isaiah 20, the Lord commands the prophet Isaiah to go naked and bare foot and to preach that way for three years. I think that would grab people’s attention on Sunday mornings at church, “Our preacher preached naked and bare foot this week.” But the purpose of this was to demonstrate what was going to happen to the Egyptians. So that the people of Judah and the leaders of Judah would be discouraged from making any kind of military alliance with them. You think the Egyptians are going to help you get away from the Assyrians? It’s not going to work because they’re going to be subjected to humiliating themselves. Just to make that one point, it tells us that Isaiah preached naked and bare foot for three years.

Sign-Acts in Ezekiel

The prophet who may have been the master of the sign-act, you know, it’s going to go even beyond burring his underwear. The prophet who was the master of the sign-act is the prophet Ezekiel. We read about some of the sign-acts that Ezekiel implemented in his ministry again as a way of making the message vivid to the people he was preaching to. Ezekiel was preaching to the exiles that were in Babylon at the same time Jeremiah was ministering to the people and the land. And the people that were the exiles that Ezekiel was preaching to were just as hard-hearted as Jeremiah. So in any way possible, how do I make this message real to them? Ezekiel wanted them to understand that God’s judgment was not
over. Even though they were living in Babylon, there was more judgment that was
going to come and there was going to be a greater exile when the Babylonians
invaded and captured Jerusalem and brought more of their fellow countrymen
there. They were not going home anytime soon.

So to make that message vivid, Ezekiel 4 and 5 tells us that Ezekiel built a
model of Jerusalem on a stone. He built siege ramps on this little model. It’s like
a prophet playing with Legos. He puts an iron plate outside of this model and then
sits on the other side of the iron plate representing the separation of God from his
people because of their sin and the model representing the siege of Jerusalem that
is going to occur as the Babylonians return and devastate the land again.

As part of that, Ezekiel goes out and lies down on his left side for 390 days,
representing the guilt and sin of Israel. Then he goes out and lies down on his
right side for 40 days representing the sin and the guilt of Judah and he simply lies
there. You could imagine the conversations that started among the people, “Did
you see what Ezekiel is doing today? Well, he’s doing the same thing he was
doing 238 other days, he’s laying on his side!”

Another time it tells us Ezekiel was silent. He was unable to speak unless
God put a message in his mouth, so the prophet is simply lying on his side, did
you see him? Hopefully after 430 days they might get the message, but the reality
is they didn’t really listen even after this.

So Ezekiel is going to do other things that accompany the sign-act to show
the horror and realities of exile that the people are going to go through. At one
point he shaves the hair that’s on his face and head. It says that he takes the hair
after he’s made himself completely bald, he throws a third of it in the wind to
represent the people that were taken into exile. He takes a sword and chops up a
third of his hair to represent the people that were killed in battle. He burns a third
of it. Then only a tiny few strands of hair, he takes those, puts those in his belt and
they represent the remnant that will be left behind after this judgment has taken
place.
God commands him to make bread out of several different types of grain. The purpose of this is not to give us a recipe for a really healthy form of bread. There is Ezekiel bread today that’s similar and I’ve had students tell me that it’s pretty good. But what the sign-act was designed to convey was the conditions of famine and how little food that they had. You would have to take every little thing you had and make bread out of it. Ezekiel is only allowed to eat 8 ounces of food a day with a small amount of water. Again, famine and drought and depravation of food and water, those are going to be the conditions of exile and that’s what that’s design to represent.

God also tells him he that he is to prepare this bread by cooking it over human excrement. Again, the conditions of exile are going to take Israel into an unclean land where they’re not going to be able to worry about ideas and practices of physical purity. For Ezekiel, who was from a priestly family, this was a horrible thing and he says, “Lord I’ve never defiled myself in this way.” So God gives him permission to cook that bread over animal dung instead of human excrement.

In chapter 12, Ezekiel packs his belongings and he digs a hole into a wall and portrays for the people what it’s going to be like for the people of Jerusalem as they go into exile.

So the prophets, particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are often going to use sign-acts as a vivid way of trying to get through to hard headed people. Maybe the same way you talk to your children when they’re not going to listen to you. It’s not conveying the inadequacy of the human words or the verbal words that Jeremiah was communicating to the people. It’s stressing their importance. You really need to listen to this. I’m going to do anything that I can to grab your attention.

Jeremiah Visits the Potter

One of the most interesting sign-act is Jeremiah two visits to the potter in Jeremiah 18 and 19. All right, here’s the passage, chapter 18, and here’s the
command that the Lord gives to him. Beginning of verse 1, “The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah saying, ‘Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.’ So I went down to the potter’s house and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.” What’s this trying to convey? Here’s the explanation verse 5 and following, “Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Oh house of Israel can I not do with you as this potter has done?’ declares the Lord. ‘Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare, concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will bring and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’”

So here is what the visit to the potter conveyed. First of all, just the image or idea of God as a potter is a very effective one. It’s a reminder of the fact that the Lord is the sovereign creator; he is the sovereign creator of all humanity. The word for potter, yotsar, is the participle form used as a noun for the word, yatsar, that is found in the creation story in Genesis chapter 2. God formed, yatsar, the man. And we see God being pictured there in Genesis two as making man, making Adam, out of a mud doll. And God, as the yotsar, as the potter, forms this mud doll and then breathes life into him. The same word is used here to describe God as the potter; shaping and forming humanity. We can imagine God doing that in creation. God was also the creator of the people and the nation of Israel. He had formed them and chosen them as a nation and he had made them his special
chosen people. Isaiah 64:8 says this: “But now O Lord you are our father; we are the clay and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand.” So God as the former, the shaper, first of all, the creator of all humanity is also the shaper and creator of the nation of Israel. All of that’s related to the image of a potter. We see the aspect of God’s sovereignty in the potter, and Jeremiah is going to say here, “Oh house of Israel can I not do with you as this potter has done?” Paul uses this image in Romans chapter 9, talking about God showing mercy to the people of Israel and God hardening the heart of pharaoh. The Lord has the right to harden or to show mercy or to bring judgment because he is the potter, he can do with the people what he wills. He creates some vessels to be vessels of mercy and others to be vessels of destruction. When you read in the context it is not divorcing their responses from God, but the Lord has that kind of sovereignty over our lives. The Lord has that kind of sovereignty over the people of Israel and he can shape and form them and do with them what he wills.

But the interesting thing is that in this statement that talks a lot about God and his sovereignty, and God and his sovereignty can do with Israel what he wills, it’s in a passage that has a lot to do with how Israel is going to respond to God. God, as the potter, doesn’t just simply form them and shape them and turn them into puppets. God shapes them and forms them in many ways based on their responses to him.

So the message that we hear out of Jeremiah’s first visit to the potter is exactly what we have been hearing in Jeremiah chapter 1-25 as a whole. God is pronouncing judgment on Judah but, at the same time, he is offering them a chance to return. In the book of Jeremiah, the early chapters of Jeremiah, ”return to the Lord, return to the Lord;” those calls are all over the place. They gradually diminish in the section of the book that we’re in now. Then in chapters 21-25 at the end of the section, there is very little about “return.” This passage is portraying for us that same thing. Israel has the opportunity to turn to God. Even though they have become spoiled and ruined, the clay is still wet. Their hearts can
still be molded and shaped and if they will turn back to God. God will reshape them and reform them into something beautiful. And so this is exactly what we’ve seen in the book of Jeremiah up to this point: the emphasis that we’ve placed on the cause to return. There is still a chance to change their ways and to be spared from the judgment that God is planning to bring against them.

General Principle: Return and Change the Future

In chapter 18:5-11, those verses that we read, maybe are one of the most important verses of passages in all the book of Jeremiah. I think it’s a theological principle that underlies all of Jeremiah’s ministry and in many ways the ministries of the prophets if the Lord announces judgment against a people. And it says, in verse 7 particularly, “If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it.” Remember those are those verbs from chapter 1, verse 9, that summarizes Jeremiah’s whole ministry. If God announces that he is going to judge, if he is going to pluck up and break down and destroy, if that nation turns from its evil, if they will choose, which God has been calling Israel to do, then God will relent of the day of disaster that he has announced that he will bring against them.

So whenever the prophets announce judgment, they simply weren’t saying this is what God is going to do, it’s fixed in stone, you can’t fix this, you can’t change this. What the prophets were saying is this is what God intends to do. These are the things that are the shadows of what will happen if you do not change your ways. But at this point, in the first visit to the potter, the potter taking that spoiled pottery and reshaping it and reforming it, Judah, at this time in their history, has the opportunity to change their ways and be spared from the judgment.

I imagine the role of the prophets is similar to the ghosts of Christmas’ future in Charles Dickens A Christmas Carol. The ghost of Christmas’ future does not just show up to announce Scrooge’s doom and this is it and this is the way it’s going to be. It’s there to give him a warning so that he has a chance to change his ways. If he does, these shadows will turn into a different reality. So in a sense, the
prophet is haunting Israel like the ghost of Christmas’ future, saying this is what God is about to do, but there is still the opportunity to change their ways. God has entered in to a give-and-take relationship with people, where he is the sovereign potter and he shapes and he forms and he does whatever he wills with people’s lives. But it is interesting in a passage that stresses God’s sovereignty so much there is also an emphasis here on human response and God shaping his responses and his decisions in light of how people respond to him.

Now sometimes in the prophets they are going to say something like this: if you repent, if you change your ways, then God will relent and not send the judgment. But there are other times in the prophets where it doesn’t appear like there are really any conditions or possibilities of change offered. But even in those cases God is willing to change his course of action if people will respond to him in the right ways.

This can happen in a positive way as well. If God promises to do something positive and he is going to, in verse 9, he is going to use the positive verbs for Jeremiah’s ministry, “If at any time I declare concerning a nation or kingdom that I will build it up and plant it.” Remember, that is Jeremiah’s message of salvation, “if that nation turns away and does evil” then God can relent from sending the good as well.” So God actions are based on the responses that people have to him and whatever our theological system is, we have to realize that there is a real give-and-take taking place here.

God Interacting

Wherever you place it, God is willing to change his mind. Again, it’s not the idea the Lord has limited information or that he changes his mind on a whim. But it’s that the Lord knows all of the very possibilities of the ways that the people will respond to him and the final course of action that he takes is based on the responses that people have to him. Now let me give you a couple examples of this: when the prophet Jonah goes to the city of Nineveh and Jonah chapter 3 the prophet says, “In 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed!” There are no conditions
attached to that. God does not say, “I might send judgment;” there is a possibility that this could happen. Jonah doesn’t say, “If you don’t change your ways here is what God is going to do.” In fact, Jonah doesn’t want them to change their ways. But in Jonah 3:5, it says that the people repent, they turn, they put on sackcloth and as a result of that God relents and does not send judgment. They really repented. They even put sackcloth on the animals. When they did that, God relented, God changed his mind, God did not send the judgment. I think the interesting thing in the prophets is that it’s the Ninevites who do this. And so there’s the question in all these times that God called out to Israel why didn’t they do that?

Micah chapter 3:9-12 is another example of this. Micah gives this word of judgment. Micah is the prophet who came to Judah in the century before Jeremiah and he says to the people of Judah. “Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight.” That’s the accusation. Here is the announcement, or more of the accusation and then the announcement. “Who build Zion with blood, Jerusalem with iniquity. Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priest teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the Lord and say, ‘is not the Lord in the midst of us?’” Verse 12, “Therefore, because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”

Micah says, “God is going to destroy Zion because of your injustice, your violence, your bloodshed, your treatment of the poor, the corruption of the leaders. Jerusalem’s going to be turned into a heap of rumble.” There are no conditions attached there. Micah doesn’t say, “Well, it might happen; it could happen,” he simply says that it is going to happen. But the interesting thing is that when Hezekiah and the people turn to the Lord in repentance, God again relented just like he did with the Ninevites and he did not send the judgment.

The interesting thing is that the leaders of Judah remember Micah’s
message when Jeremiah is preaching his temple sermon in Jeremiah 26. They begin by saying, “Jeremiah deserves to die for preaching judgment against the house of God,” but then there are some elders who step into the discussion and they say this in Jeremiah 26:16. “Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, ‘This man does not deserve to die, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God. And there were other elders of the land that spoke to all of the assembled people saying, ‘Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, and said to the people of Judah: ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.’” That’s Micah chapter 3:12, the verse that we just read. Here’s the response though that Hezekiah had: “Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all of Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and did not the Lord relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring this great disaster upon ourselves?” Look, Micah preached a message of absolute unconditional judgment, but when Hezekiah changed his ways, and when the people repented, God relented. So there is always the possibility that if people have the right response to God, then God will relent from sending the judgment that he had determined to bring against them.

God does not change his mind [sometimes]

Now there are going to be other times in the Bible and in the Old Testament where it says that God does not change his mind. 1 Samuel 15 after he is rejected Samuel. But those are places where God has issued a statement of judgment, he has sworn in oath he has made a statement, has qualified it by saying, “I will not turn away.” Those are the cases where God does not change his mind. Numbers 23:19, God does not change his mind “he is not a man that he should lie or the son of man that he should not change his mind” in that particular context because God has made certain covenantal promises to Israel that he is obligated to fulfill.
Therefore, he will not change his mind and bring a curse on Israel no matter who tries to do so.

Second Trip to the Potter’s House

So that’s the first visit to the potter, the real valid opportunity that Judah has to change their ways and to be spared from judgment. But chapter 19 tells about the second visit to the potter. This time, the Lord tells Jeremiah to do this: Go and buy a potters earthen ware flask. Take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priest and go out to the Valley of the son of Hinnom at the entrance of the Potter’s Gate and proclaim the words of the Lord.

Now the symbolism of all of this has absolutely changed. The potter is no longer working at the wheel with wet clay that can be shaped and remolded and reformed. The prophet now buys an earthen ware vessel, a potter’s jar. It’s been fixed, it’s been fired, it’s been hardened in the condition that it’s in. And he goes out, and I think it’s significant even the location of which this takes place, in the Valley of Hinnom, the place where they have worshiped idols and sacrificed children and shed innocent blood.

What the prophet does in this particular instance is that he takes this earthen ware vessel, this potter’s jar, and he smashes it to the ground. Judah, at this point, has lost the opportunity to repent. We have seen the closing down of the calls to return in Jeremiah 1-25, the reality of Jeremiah’s ministry. The two visits to the potter represent exactly that same thing. They have forfeited the opportunity to repent; therefore the only option that is left is for God to smash his people in judgment.

We’re reminded in a sense in chapter 19 of an Egyptian practice. Whereas the Egyptians were preparing to go into battle, the Egyptian priest sort of a magical right, they would write the names of the enemy of Egypt on these earthen vessels and then they would smash them on the ground. Sort of like to prepare the people during the pep rally, the gods are going to bring about the judgment of our enemies. That same symbolism is being used here. Judah is God’s enemy. And
because of the terrible things that have been done in the Valley of Hinnom, God is prepared to destroy them; God is prepared to judge them; it did not have to be that way. They brought this judgment upon themselves because the prophet repeatedly called to them, return to the Lord, come back to him, change your ways, the clay is still wet, it is still moldable in the early days of Jeremiah’s ministry. Before the Babylonian invasion occurs, you can avoid this judgment. God will relent from sending judgment if you will repent of your sin. But as time progressed and as time went on, they forfeited that opportunity and they were hardened in their sin. The only thing that was left was for God to judge and to destroy his people. In a lot of ways, we are going to hear again and again a very similar message in the book of Jeremiah. The people had an opportunity to repent. They did not. God is a God who is long suffering; he is merciful; he is abounding in covenant faithfulness; he does not delight in the death of the wicked. God gave Judah every opportunity to repent; the first visit to the potter represents that. But when the people would not repent, God would send judgment, and that’s the message, that’s the sign-act behind Jeremiah’s second visit to the potter and the message that he communicated to the people and the leaders of Judah in that particular situation.
Introduction

When God commanded to Jeremiah, in Jeremiah chapter 36, in 605 BC, after he has already been ministering for more than 20 years, to write down a scroll of the prophecies of judgment that he has been preaching against the people of Judah, and to have his scribe Baruch read them at the temple, that scroll may have looked something very similar to what we have in Jeremiah 25. It’s an anthology of 20 years of ministry on Jeremiah’s part, where he’s warning of the coming judgment. Part of the indictment against Judah, in all of this, is that Judah has had some really bad leadership. Their apostasy in part can be explained by the fact that their leaders, both the civil leaders, the kings, the officials of the kings, the military leaders, have been led astray by the spiritual leaders like the prophets, the priests, and the scribes.

In the early section of the course we looked at Jeremiah 22. In the historical background Jeremiah’s relationship with the final kings in the line of Judah, remember that that section focuses on Judah’s bad Kings. There is a woe, for example, pronounced on Jehoiakim, the King of Judah who reigned from 609-597 BC. In a sense, he is Jeremiah’s ultimate antagonist. In chapter 22, verse 13, “Woe to him who builds his house by injustice and own righteousness.” There is a death sentence pronounced on this king. The irony is that when the king’s death takes place, Jeremiah 22:18 says there will not be a woe oracle said for him, or a woe speech, or a lament said for him when he dies because the people are going to be glad to get rid of him. So God is announcing death and destruction on the kings and on the leaders.
Judgment on the Leaders of Judah

Chapter 23 verse 1, the passage that we are focusing on, begins again by announcing judgment on the leaders of Judah. And it says “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and who scatter the sheep of my pasture.” So there is a death sentence, again pronounced on the leadership of Judah.

They are described as Shepherds, which is really a very effective image of leadership. A shepherd was designed to care for the flock, it was designed to take care of the flock, to provide for them, to do whatever was necessary to protect the life of the flock. The problem with Judah’s leaders is that they have consumed the flock, rather than protecting and providing for them. The kings were a representation of that. Wicked rulers, like Jehoiakim, and the last four kings of Judah in general, reflect that poor leadership.

False Prophets

Part of the leadership problem in Judah also involves the prophets that God had sent to announce his word. The office of prophet was how God would communicate to his people. In addition to his law, and there is this message, given concerning the prophets in Jeremiah beginning in verse 9: and the Lord says, “Concerning the prophets: ‘My heart is broken within me; and all of my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the Lord and because of his holy words.” This is the prophet speaking here, not the Lord. And he says, “For the land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course is evil, and their might is not right. Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil, declares the Lord.”

At the beginning of the book in Jeremiah chapter 2, the prophet had indicted Judah for being an unfaithful wife. They had been prostituted; they had spread themselves under every tree, and on every green hill. They had been unfaithful to the Lord as their husband. The idea of spiritual adultery comes up again, and the blame for that is specifically attributed to the prophets of Judah.
They are the ones that have led the people into this unfaithfulness. They have promoted the worship of these false gods. By promising peace when God had warned of judgment. Instead, they had made the people feel comfortable about their sin. They had encouraged this adultery; they were largely responsible for it. The Lord says that because of that he is going to bring judgment on the priest and the prophets.

Chapter 23, verse 12, says, “Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths into the darkness, in which they shall be driven and fall, for I will bring disaster upon them in the year of their punishment, declares the Lord.” So the priests and the prophets had not announced the judgment, the disaster, that was going to come upon the people of Judah. So the Lord was going to punish them appropriately by bringing disaster on them as well.

Indictment of the Prophets

A further indictment of the prophets, and just how corrupt they had been, is reflected for us in verses 13-15. In the prophets of Samaria, talking about the prophets of the apostate Northern Kingdom and the people of Judah would have compared themselves to Israel and thought, “we are better than they, we are not as apostate as they were.” But, the Lord says, “In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavory thing: they prophesied by Baal and led my people, Israel astray.” A large burden for the responsibility of the defection and the apostasy of the Northern Kingdom of Israel belongs to the prophets in that land. The same thing is even more true of prophets who are in Judah. The Lord says, “But in the prophets of Jerusalem, I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery, they walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers so that no one turns from his evil; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.” You are not better than the apostate Northern Kingdom, in fact, your prophets have promoted just as much, of even more adultery. Jerusalem has become like Sodom and Gomorrah, the ultimate paradigm of wickedness in the Old Testament, because of the ministry and the message of the prophets that have led the Southern
Content of the False Prophets’ Message

Verses 16-18. Now, here are the specifics that were causing them to lead the people astray. What was the essence, or the content of their message that was making that happen? Verses 16-18 reflect that for us. “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets, who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well to you;’ And everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster will actually befall you.’”

So there are several things that the prophets were doing and saying that were leading the people astray. First of all, they were speaking their own words, their own visions, their own dreams, which often in the ancient Near East was the way in which gods communicated their message. But they had not received these messages from the Lord. 2 Peter says, that “a true prophet speaks messages that did not have its origin in the human mind or in the human will, but they spoke as they were moved along by the Holy Spirit.” That’s not true of these false prophets in Judah. They were speaking their own minds, they simply were giving their own dreams, and they were filling the people with vain hopes. They were offering a message of false peace. They were giving people, who had a presumptive faith, who believed that God was going to protect them no matter what, they gave them an excuse to continue in their sin and not to repent in the way Jeremiah was encouraging them. They were offering this false message that said, “peace, peace, God is going to take care of us, remember the promises that God has made to Jerusalem. The Lord is our fortress, we will not be moved. God is there to protect us, no matter what.” These are the prophets who are saying “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,” and Jeremiah had stood up at the Temple Sermon and said “don’t trust in these deceptive words.” These were the prophets who were saying, “remember the promise that God made to David.
God had promised to establish the throne of David forever. God had promised that he would always raise up sons for David.” Look, God has made these promises that he is going to protect us no matter what. So Jeremiah characterizes their messages as saying “peace, peace, when there is no peace.” By offering this false sense of security, they were taking away from the people any real motivation for them to change.

Conflict of True and False Prophecy

The book of Jeremiah, maybe more than any other Old Testament book, definitely more than any Old Testament prophet, is going to reflect the struggle or the conflict over true prophecy versus false prophecy. Jeremiah’s going to have to interact with these false messages of peace and these false prophets, in the stories of Jeremiah’s life, Jeremiah is actually going to interact with people like Hananiah, in the land or Shemiah, who is a priest down in Babylon among the exiles. So the problem of these false prophets and the false hopes that these prophets are offering to the people is going to constantly come up as we’re working our way through the book.

Now going back, and looking at chapters 1-25 as a whole, remember in the indictment of Israel and Judah one of the major problems that’s addressed is how the message of these false prophets, and these prophets of peace, how that has had a corrupting influence on the people of Judah. We really have prophets that have a fundamentally different understanding of the covenant than Jeremiah does. Jeremiah, based on the Sinaitic Covenant, Mosaic Covenant, believes that God blesses his people and punishes them or rewards them on the basis of their obedience or disobedience. Those traditions are as important to his theology as the promises that God made to David, or the promises that God had made concerning Zion. That covenantal understanding caused Jeremiah to say, remember that God made a promise to David, but God also placed an obligation on the sons of David. Throughout the covenant history of the Old Testament, whenever God makes covenant promises, they always are accompanied by covenant responsibilities and
obligations.

The false prophets had a completely different understanding of the covenant, they focused exclusively on the promises; they ignored the responsibilities. So you can imagine how they’re the ones who contribute to this presumptive understanding, this belief that God will protect them no matter what, this false confidence inviability of Zion meaning Zion is never going to fall, God has protected it in the past; he will always protect it in the future.

So this issue of the false prophets, who promise empty assurances of peace, is going to come up continually in the book of Jeremiah. We go back to chapter 4 verses 9 and 10, “In that day [in the day of God’s judgment] courage shall fail both king and officials. The priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded. Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God, surely you have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It shall be well with you,’ whereas the sword has reached their very life.’” These people were deceived by these prophets; into thinking that everything would be well for them. Really they were about to be devoured by the sword; judgment, devastating destruction, was about to come upon them. The interesting thing is this passage was that Jeremiah says that God is the one who has deceived the people into believing this.

God’s Punishing them with Unbelief

I don’t think that removes the responsibility from the people, it’s not blaming God for this, but it is reminding them that God has had a hand in punishing them for their unbelief in doing this. God has punished their unbelief about the message given to them by the true prophets by causing them to believe the message of the false prophets.

We’ve mentioned this in another session and in another section, but God often punishes unbelief with unbelief. The prophets, God’s messengers, had come to Israel time and time again and had warned them about judgment that was coming. The people would not listen. One of the consequences of that was that God blinded their minds so that they believed these empty messages.
Now, in light of what was going on, who would have believed that everything was going to be peaceful for them, but they had deluded themselves into believing that, and God had given them over to that belief. He had punished their unbelief with further unbelief and spiritual blindness. 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, verse 11 says that in the time when the man of sin will come in the future God will send them a delusion that will cause them to believe a lie. God is going to punish their unbelief by adding to that and causing them to believe the lies of the antichrist. We have that going on in the experience of Jeremiah as well. Romans chapter 1, the truth about God and the reality of his power and the fact that God is creator is visible in the creation itself. His eternal power and at least those attributes of God are reflected in creation, there’s a creator behind all of this but humanity from the very beginning of time has rejected that knowledge, has bent and twisted it and perverted it into idolatry. Romans 1 says, that the judgment that God executes on that is that he gives them over to their false way of thinking; and professing themselves to be wise, they become fools.

False Prophets elsewhere in Jeremiah

Judah, by its worship of idols, thought that they had found a wise way to live life that was better than the way that God mapped out for them in the law or that was better than what the prophets like Jeremiah were preaching to them. Professing themselves to be wise, they had become fools; and they had come to believe the message of these false prophets. Chapters 6, verses 13 and 15 are going to say this, “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace.” That’s sort of the motto of their message “Peace!” “Everything is going to be well.” But what these prophets were like is a physician who was prescribing two aspirins for a tumor. They were lightly treating the wound of these people and as a result were giving the people a theological excuse not to turn from their sin. So it says in chapter 6, verse 15, “Were they ashamed when they committed
abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be overthrown.” Now here it is obvious it is not the Lord who has imposed this unbelief on them. They’re responsible for their own unbelief. They have given in to the message of the prophets, but what has happened is that by these false offers of peace the people have not been confronted by their sin. They feel no shame. The prophets have validated their lifestyle by saying, “God is going to take care of you no matter what.” They have believed this message and ultimately they are going to be diluted by that.

Chapter 8, verses 8-12 says this: “How can you say, ‘We are wise and the law of the Lord is with us’? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.” People that were teaching the word of God had altered its message. Now whether they were actually changing the text or not is not clear. But what they were changing was the force and the significance and the emphasis of that message. The text stressed both their covenant responsibilities as well as their covenant blessings. They were altering the message to where the only thing that was being focused on was the promises.

“Therefore,” in verse 10, “I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors.” They are going to experience judgment; they have not turned from their sin. The problem is the prophets. Again verse 11, “They have healed the wound of my people lightly saying, ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace.” Like a physician who says, “everything is well, take two aspirin when there is a rotten internal disease that is eating away their lives that needs to be treated. The message of the prophets, like Jeremiah, who are confronting them with their sin and saying, “you need heart surgery” at the beginning, that’s a painful process but ultimately that’s the only message that could save them. What Jeremiah says is that ultimately what is going to happen to these people is that they are going to come to a place of bitter disappointment because of these false promises of peace are going to end up proving to be an empty delusion. So we see the
disappointment of the people who commit themselves to this false assurance of peace in chapter 8, verse 19 and they’re making these statements, “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” That’s what the false prophets have been telling them, “The Lord is in Jerusalem,” “the Lord is your fortress, and you’ll be okay, you’ll be taken care of.” They had Scripture verses to support that.

But the Lord says, if I am in their midst, “Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” You know we believed that God was going to step in at the eleventh hour and rescue us and deliver us, but God’s not there He’s not saving us for the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.” They’re going to come to realize too late that they have a terminal illness and when they come to see this the only thing that is going to be left to mourn about is the disaster that God is planning to bring on them.

Chapter 14 we go to verses 13-16 there’s another reminder of the message of these false prophets and here’s what the Lord says about the lying prophets. Verse 13: “Ah, Lord God, behold the prophets, say to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.’” Jeremiah was warning them about the covenant curses, the sword, famine, and plague. These prophets were saying, “you don’t have anything to worry about! Jeremiah’s an alarmist, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. We have a message from God that God is going to give us peace.” But here’s what the Lord says “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesizing to you a lying vision, worthless divination.” They’re no different than the prophets who are using astrology and all of these other things. They are not telling you the truth but the deceit of their own mind. “Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name although I did not send them, and who say ‘Sword and famine shall not come upon this land;’ by sword and famine those prophets shall
be consumed.” They have announced to the people that the people are not going to experience sword and famine and the covenant curses, therefore the punishment is going to fit the crime, because God is going to make sure that those prophets experience the very judgment that they have told the people were not going to come.

So this conflict between Jeremiah as a true prophet of God who is faithfully representing what the covenant between God and Israel is all about, and the fact that if they want to be blessed by God they must walk in accordance with God’s commandments and God’s ways. That conflict with these false prophets who are simply giving empty assurances of the peace works its way throughout the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is going to describe their theology as sheker, the Hebrew word for “falsehood;” and that’s going to be a recurring word.

 Jeremiah 23 and Prophetic Conflict

So when we come to chapter 23, we understand this ongoing battle that Jeremiah is engaging with these false prophets. We have to put ourselves in the shoes of the people and feel somewhat sympathetic for them because the question is, what does a real prophet look like? How do we tell the difference? So if you’re living in Judah in the 8th century in the 6th century or in the 7th century as God’s getting ready to bring these judgments. You have, on the one hand, a prophet like Jeremiah who is warning you of judgment, on the other hand you have these prophets of peace like Hananiah, that we’re going to meet in chapter 28, promising that things will be well and in two years all of this is going to be resolved. Which one of those prophets are you going to be inclined to believe?

 Deuteronomy 18 and 13: On the nature of True/False Prophets

I think the tendency would be to believe this message of peace rather than to pay attention to the warnings of judgment. God had not left his people without a way to tell the difference between true prophets and false prophets. The office of prophet was really established and initiated with Moses himself. Moses was the representation or the prototype of what a prophet was supposed to be like. Then
later on Samuel in many ways, as kind of the first prophet in the time of the monarchy represented what a prophet was going to be like. But back in Deuteronomy chapter 18 the Lord had given a promise in the days of Moses and here’s what he says: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me, from among your brothers, it is to him that you shall listen.” So in the days of Moses, Moses was kind of the prototype of an Israelite prophet. When the Lord had spoken to Israel at Mt. Sinai and the people saw the power of God and the thunder and the smoke, they were afraid to go into God’s presence. So they said to Moses, “you go to God as our representative, you listen to what God says, and you come back and tell us that message.” That became the role and the mission of a prophet. So what Deuteronomy 18:15 is saying, “I will raise up a prophet for you like Moses” that passage is not just talking about one single prophet. In a collective way, I will raise up a prophet for you like Moses. God was saying that throughout Israel’s history he would for each generation, he would raise up prophets that would do the work of Moses; of going to God, getting his word, getting his message, and coming back and giving that message to the people.

Now when we hear that passage, maybe as Christians “I will raise up a prophet like Moses,” we think of Jesus as the eschatological prophet; and Acts chapter 3 is going to use the passage in that way. But really in this passage it is collectively talking about all of the prophets. After Moses it’s going to be Joshua, then there’s Samuel, there’s Elijah, there’s Elisha, there’s Isaiah, there’s Jeremiah…all of the prophets are fulfillments of this promise: “I will raise up a prophet like Moses.” Remember at the call of Jeremiah, where Jeremiah says, “God I’m but a child I don’t know how to speak.” In the very first chapter, Jeremiah is validated as a prophet like Moses. In this passage in Deuteronomy 18 it says in verse 18, “I will put my words in his mouth” that is exactly what God says to Jeremiah in chapter 1. So, Jeremiah is a prophet like Moses, he is one of these true spokesmen of God that God raises up to tell the people what they need to hear.
The question is how do we know a true prophet? In Deuteronomy 18:15 and following the Lord gives Israel some standards to measure the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet. A true prophet, must be an Israelite; he must speak in the name of the Lord; he must not advocate the worship of other gods or lead the people into idolatry. He must issue prophecies that come to pass 100% of the time; a good batting average is not enough. If a prophet is wrong a single time, he’s not a true prophet. If a prophet pretends to speak in the name of God, but God has not sent him, that’s a serious offense. Deuteronomy chapter 13: if a prophet advocates the worship of other gods, then that prophet is to be put to death.

Determining True/False Prophets in Jeremiah’s Day

So in Jeremiah’s day, some of the prophets that were there in Judah would have been invalidated by that one test. They were advocating the worship of Yahweh and the worship of Baal; by doing that they had proved that they did not meet the test. But the problem in Jeremiah chapter 23, and really the problem with many of these false prophets, is they did not necessarily come advertising themselves as prophets of other gods. The struggle for the people in Jeremiah’s day is they don’t have a detector that they can wave over and say, “You are a true prophet, you’re a false prophet.” False prophets, in order to be effective at what they do, do not wear t-shirts that identify themselves as false prophets.

Many of them were smart enough not to speak in the name of Baal, even if that was what may have been motivating their message. They are going to speak in the name of the Lord just as much as Jeremiah did. J. Andrew Dearman raises this possibility; many of these false prophets, at times, may have been true prophets. They may have been people who at some point in their ministry and in their lifetime or maybe even shortly before they issued some of these incorrect prophecies, God may have spoken through them. They may have had at some point in their life and ministry had a valid work of being prophet like Moses. So
there’s this struggle with knowing the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet.

We have the test: if a prophet predicts something, then it’s something that has to happen 100% of the time. The problem with that test is that Jeremiah is saying the city of Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, and that the exile is going to last for 70 years. False prophets are saying we’re going to be spared and within two years the crisis will be over, the articles of the Lord’s house will be returned to us. The problem with the 100% test is these events haven’t happened yet. We read the book and we know Jeremiah was the true prophet here. The historical events that unfold are ultimately going to validate Jeremiah’s message. Read the accounts in chapter 39 and chapter 52 they’re going to show us Jeremiah was exactly right. The people lived in exile for 70 years. Jeremiah was on target, but those events hadn’t happen yet so again, how do we know the difference?

Jeremiah 23 and False Prophets

In chapter 23 going to back to this message, the Lord is going say again the problem with these false prophets is that they are speaking messages that “I have not spoken through them.” In spite of the difficulties that the people are having in balancing and weighing through and assessing these; Jeremiah is a true prophet. These opponents who are preaching peace, peace are not, and here are the ultimate reasons why, verse 16, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word, ‘It shall be well with you.’” So God’s going to announce, “Look, this is just their word. I have not sent them I have not spoken to them.”

Here’s the verse I want to call attention to. There is a very powerful image of what a true prophet is in verse 18: The Lord says, “For who among them has stood in the council of the Lord to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?” The council of the Lord represents, in a sense, we could compare it to the cabinet meeting in heaven, where God is presiding as
the Great King, and as the presiding ruler over this council of his angels. God is announcing his decrees and his decisions.

Divine Council

Now in the pagan religions around Israel and Judah the divine council represented the meeting place of the gods. Where these many multiple gods would get together and they would work out the decrees and the decisions and sometimes announce them or at least carry them out in the human realm. The ancient cultures around Israel, these pagan cultures, envisioned the divine government above like human government below or maybe even had used it as a way of validating various forms of government.

In Israel, we do not have multiple gods in this council. What we do have is God meeting with his angelic messengers and those execute and carry out his will. In the council of God, the Lord announces his decrees and his decisions. We have some biblical passages that I think reflecting the idea of the council for the Lord. In Genesis chapter 1 as God prepares to create human beings he says, in verse 26, “let us make man in our own image.” I think sometimes as Christians we want to read that and hear, “let us,” as a reflection of the trinity; that idea is not clearly unpackaged in the Old Testament. What is more likely, is the idea is that God is a announcing among his divine council his intention to create humanity and he’s going to make human beings in the image of God. In Isaiah chapter 6 when the prophets sees the vision of the Lord seated on this throne high and lifted up. He’s the great king; he’s the sovereign and the beings that are around him are announcing his glory and his holiness and his power. The Lord in the midst of his divine council says, who will go and speak for us?” Remember Isaiah responds by saying, “Here I am Lord, send me. I will go and speak.” So I think we have some passages that illustrate for us exactly what Jeremiah’s talking about here in chapter 23:18. The council of the Lord is the place where God is announcing his decisions and his decrees.
I think another Old Testament passage that we can bring into this decision is Job chapter 1. God is meeting with the sons of God, the angels and the spiritual beings that are part of his divine council and Satan shows up at that divine council meeting to question the integrity of Job and to raise doubts about him. So we sort of see the heavenly council meeting in action in Job chapter 1.

So here’s the significance of all of this in verse 18 in Jeremiah chapter 23, Jeremiah’s saying what characterizes a true prophet is this: as God is having his heavenly cabinet meetings, God invites a true prophet to come in to those council meeting, to sit in on the presidings to hear what God has announced and then as his messenger to go back to other human beings and to announce the message that has been determined and decreed in heaven. This is a pretty audacious statement. Jeremiah’s saying, “You want to know the reason why I am telling you the truth, when I announce to you the judgment is coming and why these guys who are over here saying there’s going to be peace, when there’s not going to be? You know why you can trust me? There’s been a meeting up in heaven, I was there; I was at the meeting. I’ve heard what God is determining and what God has decided to do so I have come to you with the minutes of that meeting to announce God’s plans, God’s decisions, and God’s intentions. These prophets that are announcing to you that everything is going to go well, that there’s only going to be peace and no judgment, they did not stand, they weren’t there! I was at the meetings, they weren’t! Instead of them telling you what God has determined and decreed, they’re only speaking their own minds. They’re only giving their own commentary about this. They’re speaking their own delusions. I’m coming to you with ‘thus says the Lord’ because I’ve been in the heavenly council meetings and I’m his messenger.”

Now we have one other passage about the divine council and the role of the prophet in that council that I think is very important to all of this it’s found in 1 Kings chapter 22. It’s one of my favorite stories because of the message of the prophet there. We have a prophet named Micaiah. Ahab and King Jehoshaphat of
Judea have allied themselves together and the issue of that is Jehoshaphat should not have been in that alliance. But Jehoshaphat is seeking a message from a true prophet of God. The false prophets of Ahab have come in and they’ve offered assurances, “Hey, things are going to go well.” One of them even has a helmet with horns on it and he goes around butting into the walls showing what Ahab and Jehoshaphat were going to do to their enemies. So there’s this massive group of prophets that are saying, “Hey, look things are going to go great; things are going to go well.” But Jehoshaphat says, “Aren’t there any prophets of Yahweh here?”

Ahab says, “Well, there’s one, his name is Micaiah and I hate him because he never says anything good about me. Let’s bring him in.” Micaiah, apparently in a very sarcastic way says to Ahab, “Yeah, go into battle. The Lord will bless you and protect you.” Ahab, I think can read the sarcasm, and says, “Okay, Micaiah tell us what you really think.” Micaiah says this: “I was present at the assembly of God, I was, I was in the divine council and I heard God as the one who presides over that council stand and say to his messengers, ‘Who will go and be my messenger and deceive Ahab so that he will go into battle because I have determined that I am going to judge him for his apostasy and put him to death?’”

Micaiah says, “There was a divine messenger, there was an angel there who said, ‘I will go and I will execute this plan.’” Then Micaiah says what’s going on here is that these are false promises that are coming from your prophets who are on your payroll are really giving you the delusional message of this prophet, or of this angel that God has sent to deceive you because the Lord has determined to put you to death. We struggle with this, “Does God lie or does God deceive? But again we are going back to the idea that God punishes unbelief with unbelief. God can harden the heart of Pharaoh when the pharaoh refuses to believe. God can send a delusion message for Ahab to believe because Ahab’s heard the truth again and again and he’s rejected it. But we have the very clear idea, Micaiah says, “I was at the meeting up in heaven and I heard what God has decreed and what God has determined and, and the Lord has determined to put you to death.”
Jeremiah is making the same claim about himself as he preaches, and he says in verse 22 about the false prophets, “But if they had stood in the Lord’s council like Jeremiah had, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds.” They didn’t preach, they’re not preaching the word of the Lord. They are not warning the people of the judgment to come, and the reason is, they did not stand in the council of the Lord. That’s the issue. Jeremiah is speaking a message from God.

So this idea, this image, this picture of the divine council, and the prophets access to the divine council is a very powerful confirmation of the New Testament teaching about the inspiration of Scripture. 2 Timothy 3, “all scripture is God-breathed, its spoken by God,” Jeremiah is not speaking his word. The words of Jeremiah and the word of the Lord are equated. We have theological systems today that say, “the Bible contains the word of God, or the Bible gives testimony to the word of God. That is not in line with the theology of Jeremiah, which says the words of the prophet are the words of God. Why? Because he has been in the divine council. It’s a confirmation of 2 Peter 1 that says, “the prophets did not speak messages that came from human will, or that were initiated by themselves, but they spoke as they were moved along by God” and that’s the difference.

As a result of that, verses 16-22 is going to emphasize the prophets that are promising you peace, the word that describes their message is sheker. It’s a lie. Verses 33-40, we have a word play and these always stand out and interest me, that again they are going to speak of the worthlessness of the message of these prophets. It says in verse 33, “When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you, ‘What is the burden of the Lord?’” A prophetic message, by the Israelite prophets is often referred to as a burden, a massa. I think it’s the idea of something that has to be carried and taken to the people. But when the people ask, “What’s the burden of the Lord?”, this is what Jeremiah is suppose to say to them, to the prophets. “‘You are the burden, and I will cast you off, declares the Lord.’
And as for the prophets, priest or one of the people who says, ‘The burden of the Lord,’ I will punish that man and his household.” So the burden has become the prophets themselves, or the reading in the Septuagint, “what is the burden of the Lord?” Jeremiah, turns around and says, “You’re the burden of the Lord.” But instead of being a word from God that would help them, it has become a word from God that has burdened them down, and was ultimately keeping them from coming to know the truth. As a result of that, the message of these prophets is not something that leads them to God; it is something that leads them away from God.

Jeremiah versus Hananiah: Prophetic Conflict

Now as we move into the second half of the book, and some of our layers, we are going to get to see a real living example of Jeremiah’s interaction with one of these prophets of sheker. Again, it’s going to be Jeremiah and Hananiah in Jeremiah chapter 27 to 28. There’s going to be this conflict, because this is the time when Jeremiah comes in and he is wearing the yoke. He has gotten this wooden yoke and he’s carrying it around, and he’s under its burden and its weight. He says to the people, “This represents how God is going to put you in subjugation and bondage to Babylon.” A prophet by the name of Hananiah, who comes and speaks in the name of the Lord, says, “That’s not the way it is.” He takes the yoke off of Jeremiahs neck, and he smashes it to the ground. He says, “the Lord is going to break our bondage. And within two years, all the articles of the Lord’s temple that have been taken away are going to be restored to us.” The people are going to be faced again with this struggle, how do we know the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet? Jeremiah’s message is that this word that God was going to bring peace, was a message that had not come from God. It was a message that simply was a dream of the people. Jeremiah’s message is the one that is more likely; Jeremiah’s message is the one that they need to pay attention to when they look at their own lives, when they see they are not fulfilling their covenant responsibilities, when they see the noose tightening around their neck.
How can Hananiah’s message possibly be the truth? But when we get into those passages we’re going to have to deal with the struggle that Jeremiah’s audiences are having. How do we know the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet?

In chapter 23, Jeremiah wants us to see the difference between a true and a false prophet is that the true prophet has stood in the council of the Lord; he has received a message from God. On the other hand, these prophets who are promising peace, these prophets like Hananiah who are telling the people a message that they want to hear are speaking words that are just the visions of their own mind. The people are ultimately going to learn of the emptiness of those promises, when they face the destruction that God is going to bring against them. As we think about our contemporary culture, we come to realize that the problem of false teaching and false prophecy is just as real today as it was then.

The New Testament and passages in 2 Peter and Jude remind us that false teachers and false prophets were a problem in the early church. The thing that I’m reminded of as I’m comparing the true message of Jeremiah and the false message of the prophets in his day is that false teaching often involves saying what is popular. It involves saying what people want to hear. It is preaching a message that keeps us from conflict in our culture that keeps us from being accused of being narrow minded and intolerant. It is a passage or message that helps to make people comfortable, when the job of a prophet sometimes is to definitely not make them feel comfortable. It is often simply validating the prevailing ideas of the culture around us, rather than confronting that culture with the truth of God’s word. I’m convinced today that if Hananiah were alive he would have a lot of followers on Twitter and Facebook. He might possibly be a very popular television preacher who presided over a mega-church because he preached a message that people wanted to hear. So sometimes the danger of false prophecy particularly is that it involves shaping our message in a way that confirms and validates what people want to hear. 2 Timothy chapter 4, verse 3 says, “that in the
last time the last days there will come a time when people no longer tolerate sound teaching.” They will only want teachers that tickle their ears or that scratch where they’re itching. They will seek out teachers that validate their own sinful natures.” That’s exactly what happened with Hananiah. Hananiah and the false prophets were preaching a message that allowed the people to continue in their sinful ways rather than confronting them with the need to change.

False Prophecy in our Times

So let me just close by thinking about some ways that that maybe we do the same, that is, making our message comfortable for people to hear. False prophecy today may take the form of prosperity theology where instead of reminding people of the fact that the call to be a disciple of Jesus may lead to suffering and taking up your cross, we tell people that God wants them to be healthy, successful, prosperous and believing in God or trusting in Jesus can help you to get that. Believe me, when you do that you don’t have a problem gathering an audience; it’s a message that people want to hear. Sometimes it leads to a syncretism of our materialistic American culture with orthodox Christian faith. I think that’s really what prosperity theology is. Use your faith as a way to gain this wealth that has been turned into a god by our culture. False prophecy and saying what is comfortable may result in people who are so steeped in post-modernism that they surrender the exclusivity of Christian faith and the teaching that Jesus Christ is the only way to God, or they have been bought into the relativism of post-modernism to the extent that they believe that the moral absolutes of Scripture are up for grabs. I think in a sense, that’s the same thing that the prophets of peace were doing in Jeremiah’s day.

We’re drawn into this when we think that building a large and successful church is so important to us that we emphasize the positive aspects of the gospel; the love of God, to the exclusion of the wrath of God and the demands that the gospel places upon us. It’s unpopular today to speak of a holy God who demands atonement for sin. It sounds like child abuse, that God would demand that his own
son die as atonement for sin. So let’s not talk about that. Let’s alter what the cross or what the atonement is all about. The doctrine of eternal punishment is offensive, so we’ll revise our understanding of these texts. In a sense, we’re doing what Hananiah and the prophets of peace were doing then. We have to redeem the Bible because its out of step with the prevailing ideas of culture; its too controversial to really reflect upon what the Bible says about ethical issues like abortion or homosexuality so we’re not going to talk about that. Let’s focus on helping the poor or changing the culture. Why bother about all of these inconvenient doctrines and theological truths that divide people? The answer to that is that what you believe is ultimately the only thing that will consistently motivate you to do the right things. The Bible does not teach that ethics begin before doctrine, doctrine gives rise to ethics.

So in many ways the reality of false teaching and saying what is popular, or what is in line with what the culture believes is as much a temptation today as it was then. So the danger and the struggle of the people in Jeremiah’s day of how do we know the difference between true spokesmen of God and and those who are false is still present today. The reminder from Jeremiah is the true covenant spokesmen of God were those who were reminding the people both of God’s love and God’s blessing but also reminding the people of God’s judgment, God’s holiness and the responsibilities that he placed upon them. False teaching can come to us in very subtle ways and it is something that we need to be as much on guard about as the people in Jeremiah’s day. As we work our way through the stories in Jeremiah’s life we’re going to see real living examples of the struggle between Jeremiah and the false teachers, and how much that bled into his ministry and we’re going to be reminded through that of why it’s still important for us today.
We’re beginning a new segment of our study of the book of Jeremiah moving away from chapters 1 to 25 and the messages of judgment and indictment against Jews that are found there into the second section of the book that is found in chapters 26 to 45. We notice that there is a difference between this material in that we are primarily in this section looking more at stories about Jeremiah’s life and ministry and the things that take place in the last days of Judah as a nation. Chapters 1 to 25 are more a sampling of his messages of judgment. Again, I think that we can connect chapters 1 to 25 with this story in Jeremiah 36 where God commands Jeremiah, after he has been preaching for twenty years, to write out on a scroll the messages that he's been preaching over the entire course of his ministry. Jeremiah obviously cannot write down every word or give us transcripts of every sermon that he's preached but chapters 1 to 25 are likely a reflection of what that scroll might have looked like and the messages that Jeremiah had preached. What we have in 26 to 45 are the stories and the accounts of how the people responded to that message. As Jeremiah preached these messages, what was their response to that? That begins to be fleshed out and explained for us in the second section of the book.

Response to the Word of God

The focus of the book of Jeremiah is on the word of God and some statistics that I think help reflect that the expression; "thus says the Lord" appears 155 times in the book of Jeremiah. The expression "the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" or "came to me" appears 23 times. The description of the passage or section or an oracle as a declaration of the Lord appears 167 times. So “the word of the Lord” is very important to the book of Jeremiah. What this section is about is Judah’s response to the word of the Lord.
It also is going to give to us in chapters 37 to 44 more of a chronological narrative of what happens in the last days of Judah, the fall of Jerusalem and the city, and then the aftermath of that fall in chapters 40 to 44 showing us the consequences of what happened as a result of the fact Judah did not respond to the word of God in the way God had desired. So the book of Jeremiah is about the word of God. It’s the story of the word of God, remember Andrew Shead saying that. What happens as the word of God becomes a fire in the prophet’s mouth? The destruction that brings those who reject the word, the tearing down the dismantling of the nation of Judah because of their apostasy and unbelief but then the power of the word of the Lord that is also going to rebuild and to restore.

Stories of the Prophet’s Life

Jeremiah is unique among the prophets in the sense that it gives us so many stories, narratives, and accounts of actual events from the prophet's life. We have a handful of those things from some of the other prophets but there is no other prophetic book, other than the very brief book of Jonah, that focuses so much on the life and the actual events that take place in the prophet's life as the book of Jeremiah. For example, in the book of Isaiah we have narratives from Isaiah's life that appear in chapters 6 to 8 and chapters 36 to 39. In the book of Jeremiah we are going to have 20 chapters that primarily are going to focus on stories from Jeremiah's life. So, I'm excited about getting into this. There are some great stories here. My kids love stories, and I found that, even as a seminary professor, my students love stories. So I think we can learn from these accounts. There's some incredible literary, rhetorical, and theological artistry in this section. This particular section of the book is important to me because a number of years ago I wrote my dissertation on Jeremiah 26 to 45 and I will definitely resist the urge to bring my dissertation in and read parts of that, which would be even more boring than my lectures. So let's get into this.

The Word of God and How People Respond to It

Jeremiah 26 to 45 thinking about it as a story not just about Jeremiah's life
but about the word of God and how people respond to it. The purpose of this section of the book is not to give us a biography of Jeremiah's life. It's not to tell the story of Jeremiah per se but it's more to provide a theological reflection on what are the consequences of the people's choices primarily not to listen to the word of God.

There is an expression that appears all throughout this section of the book of Jeremiah; it's going to say again and again and repeatedly: “the people did not listen,” or “the people did not obey the message of Jeremiah.” In fact, when I wrote my dissertation my subtitle for this section “the people have not obeyed.” The Hebrew word “to listen” or “to obey” is the word shama. So the prophet is going to repeatedly say or the narratives are going to repeatedly unfold for us "they did not listen," or "they did not obey." That expression appears in these verses chapter 26, verse 5; chapter 29, verse 19; chapter 32, verse 33; chapter 34, verses 14 and 17; chapter 35, verses 14, 15, 16, and 17; chapter 36, verse 31; chapter 37, verses 1 and 2 and then verse 14; chapter 40 verse 3; chapter 42, verses 13 and 21; chapter 43, verse 7; and then chapter 44, verses 16 and 23. So this expression works itself throughout. It’s there through chapter 26 it's there at the end of chapter 44 and on top of that it is repeated again and again. The people did not shama; they did not listen--they did not obey.

This idea, however, is not something that's new this is not something that we are just introduced to as we get to chapter 26. It is a problem that is continually and repeatedly noted in the first part of the book as well. In studying the literary design of the book of Jeremiah one of the things that I've noticed is that many times in the summary sections in the prose narratives that we've looked at are sort of giving us an interpretive guide for the poetry and a summary of what Jeremiah’s message was all about that is going to be a recurring issue. The people did not listen and did not obey what the prophet had to say. As a matter of fact, they have not been listening and they have not been obeying for a long time throughout their history before Jeremiah ever came on the scene.
In the Temple Sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7 this becomes the issue at the end of the message. We read in verse 23, “This commandment I gave them: ‘Obey [shama] my voice, and I will be your God, and you should be my people. And walk in the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.’ But they did not obey [they did not shama] or incline their ear, but they walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and they went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the lord of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all of my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ears, but stiffen their necks. They did worse than their fathers.” So they did not obey the word of God. It’s not simply some restatement for how people respond to the message of Jeremiah, in many ways its some statement for the whole history of all people of Israel of Judah.

Chapter 11 verse 17 again another prose sermon about the broken covenant and the covenant curses; verse 7 says this: “For I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice [shama]. Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not.” This is the same thing, the same wording again in a prose section. Chapter 19 is after Jeremiah’s second visit to the potter where he smashed the jar because things were irreparably doomed and judgment is inevitable there in verse 15: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words.”

So chapter 25, which again is a prose section is a summary tying together everything that we see in the book, and chapter 25 verse 3-9 says this: “For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah until this very day, the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor
inclined you ears to hear, although the Lord has persistently sent to you all of his servants the prophets saying, ‘Turn now, every one of you from your evil way.’”

So in the literary design and the rhetorical strategy of the book of Jeremiah there is a constant emphasis on people not listening to the word of God. It’s an expression that is repeated throughout the second section of the book—that’s what it’s all about.

But also, in the first part of the book, as we’re having the actual message being preached, as there are these prose passages that want to explain for us and summarize for us what this message is all about, it comes down to constantly this same issue: they haven’t listened to the word of God.

Structure not Haphazard

So that’s critical to the message of the book of Jeremiah. Another reflection for us I think a book of Jeremiah is not a book that has haphazardly been thrown together we don’t take the oracles of Jeremiah and just thrown them together with the story. The emphasis on not hearing the word of the Lord that will help you to keep thinking and focus on what’s this is all about. It’s not a biography for Jeremiah. It’s a history of rejection of God’s word.

Now there is something else you’re going to notice as you work through the story and it represents some problems as you try to understand this part of the book. In fact, if pick up the book of Jeremiah and read it, I think this is going to be one of the biggest struggle that there is no real chronology in the section or it seems to skip back and forth. Sometimes it’s going to skip back and forth between genres it is definitely not going to read in a linear chronological way. So again I think that it’s not about us giving a biography of Jeremiah’s ministry from day one on until the end of the story. It is going to be arranged in a way that is different for our reading and different for our way of understanding but again I think is related to the theological message and a theological design of this section.

The Jehoiakim/Zedekiah Oscillation

Let me just sort of work through this. If I was trying to read Jeremiah 26 to
and pay attention to chronology, I will see something like this. In chapter 26, we have a story from the region of Jehoiakim 609-597 early days of his reign. In chapter 27 to chapters 29, we immediately jump forward to the reign of Zedekiah with each other they are placed beside one another. In chapter 30 and 31 we have poetic oracles that do not have a chronology. We have even left the genre of narrative. In chapters 32 and 33, we have messages and episodes of hope that come from the time of Zedekiah and we’re back into prose, that carries over into an event from Zedekiah’s life in chapter 34 that is going to focus more on judgment. But then interestingly, as we go to chapter 35 and chapter 36 we’re back in the reign of Jehoiakim 609-597. So we start with Jehoiakim 26, we move to Zedekiah and some poetic oracles 26, 27, to 34 and then in 35, 36 we are back to Jehoiakim.

In chapter 37 to 44 we probably have the most chronological order in section of this part of the book. May be this originally existed as its own independent source but we have a more chronological story of what happened in Judah’s final days. Jeremiah being in prison, how the people respond to the word of God, the fall of Jerusalem when the king rejects Jeremiah’s message. Then what’s going to happen in the aftermath of that? Jeremiah is a prophet that is among of those who are left in the land and Jeremiah is a prophet in Egypt when he is take down there by military officers at the end of his ministry. That part of the book end that part of the chapter 26 to 45 looks fairly chronological.

But then the book concluded. Chapter 45 id in the fourth year of Jehoiakim an oracle that is given to Baruch that goes back to 609 and specifically the year 605. So, we’ve got Jehojakim, Zedekiah, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah, fall of Jerusalem, the aftermath of that and then back to the reign of Jehoiakim. Obviously this is not chronological. What is going on here? Well, again the purpose of this not to tell this in a logical fashion or an unchronological fashion the history of Jeramiah. I believe that the argument of this material highlights the recurring cycle of the people disobeying and refusing to the hear the word of the Lord. Remember
Jeremiah had an incredibly long ministry. It lasted at least something like 45 to 50 years.

So what I believe is going on in the chapter 26-45 is that the ministry so Jeremiah could be divided into three basic time periods. What’s happening here is that it advance from these different types from all three of these time periods are being joined together sometimes in non-chronological ways to say the response that the people had to Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry isn’t really very different to the response that the people had at the end of his ministry.

So the early stage of Jeremiah’s ministry we can identify that as the time before 597. The time before when the Babylonians crisis really became serious and the second wave of exiles were taken away and King Jehoiachin is removed from the throne. We have advanced from this early stage of Jeremiah’s ministry in chapter 26 and 36. Jeremiah is warning them you need to change your ways and if you do, there is the possibly that God will relent and not send the judgment. So in the early days of the ministry there’s a choice that Judah has that they’re not going to have later in Jeremiah’s ministry. They can actually repent at this point and God may not send the judgment.

Passing the Point of No Return

Now after 597 after the second wave of exiles have already been taken away, and the destruction of Jerusalem is looming in the future in 587 and 586, they don’t have that choice any more. The choice facing them then is going to be surrender to the Babylonians or be destroyed. Look, you’re being judged no matter what. You can either surrender or you can be destroyed. But in the early stages in Jeremiah’s ministry, they had a legitimate opportunity to repent and avoid judgment. It’s like the first visit to the potter. They are still clay that can be reshaped and reformed without facing judgment.

So we have events depicting for us how they rejected the word of the Lord in the early stages of Jeremiah’s ministry. Particularly, King Jehoiakim did not listen to the word of God. After Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon, he executes a prophet
named Uriah. After Jeremiah’s scroll is read to him, he cuts it up and throws it into the fire. Jehoiakim did not listen to the word of God [Jer 36].

But then we also have events after 597, after the second wave of exile, but before 587-586 and the destruction of Jerusalem. We have stories from the reign of Zedekiah in 27 and 28, chapter 29, chapter 34, chapters 37-39 that describe for us and explain for us that Zedekiah did not listen to the word of God either. The message that Jeremiah was preaching to Zedekiah was: submit to Babylon. If you and your military officers will submit to Babylon, will surrender, then you and your officials, and the people can be spared from destruction. If you don’t submit, then the Babylonians are going to destroy everything; and that’s exactly what happens.

So we have this summary statement in chapter 37, verses 1 and 2:
“Zedekiah the son of Josiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon made king in the land Judah, reigned instead of Coniah the son of Jehoiakim. But neither he nor his servants nor the people of the land listened to the words of the Lord that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet.” So episodes from the earliest stage of Jeremiah’s ministry in the days of Jehoiakim are placed directly beside episodes from Zedekiah in the second stage of Jeremiah’s ministry to say, basically, Jeremiah got the same response. Jehoiakim and Zedekiah seem to be different people. Jehoiakim responds in anger and hostility. He never actually has a physical encounter with Jeremiah but his rejection of the word of the Lord is placed side by side to the rejections of Zedekiah, who was constantly asking the prophet to pray for him, who is constantly inquiring of the prophet. But you know what? It doesn’t matter. Ultimately, he lacks the courage and the fear of the Lord to really obey. So, he’s really no different than Jehoiakim.

The third stage of Jeremiah’s ministry, is the time after the fall of Jerusalem in 587; going probably on to 580. Initially, Jeremiah remains in the land with the people. He’s going to minister to the poor people that are there in a very servant like way being there he could when he had the option he could have gone to
Babylon. He’s going to continue to preach the word of the Lord. Jeremiah actually disappears for a couple of chapters here. But the message of Jeremiah is still there. What Jeremiah is telling the people in the aftermath of exile is actually the same thing that he is telling them before—submit to Babylon. Serve the Babylonians and things will go well for you. Zedekiah had rejected that message. When Jeremiah came to him and said submit to Babylon and you’ll be able to save yourself and the city and the officials, the officials turned around and accused Jeremiah of being a traitor. He’s encouraging treason in going over to the Babylonians. But Jeremiah was looking at this from God’s perspective. Babylon was God’s instrument of judgment, they could not resist them.

So in the aftermath of exile, Jeremiah is trying to say the same thing: God is using Babylon as the instrument of judgment—that’s going to last for about 70 years and then God’s going to deal with Babylon. But in that time, you need to submit to Babylon. The people in the aftermath of exile are going to respond to that message of “submit to Babylon” in exactly the way Zedekiah did. They’re not going to listen to what the prophet has to say. Ishmael, this renegade from the family of David, is going to murder Gedaliah, the governor that the Babylonians have appointed and he’s not going to listen to the prophet’s message: submit to Babylon.

You would think that after all the things the people of Judah have experienced in the life and ministry of Jeremiah after he’s been preaching to them for more than 20 years that judgment is going to fall that the city is going to be destroyed—you would think they would listen, you would think they would respond to what the Lord had to say. But they are continuing to not listen to the word of God.

So after Ishmael assassinates Gedaliah and he flees, there’s another group that comes to Jeremiah. There’s a group of officers led by a man named Johanan. Who rescues some Jewish refugees from Ishmael as this renegade and they come to Jeremiah and they say: “Jeremiah we want you to pray for us,” which is
interesting because before the fall of Jerusalem, God had prohibited the prophet from praying for the people. Jeremiah says, “Yes, I’ll gladly pray for you. The time of judgment is over.” But they have the opportunity now for the prophet to pray for them; for the prophet to give them direction. Jeremiah says, “Look, I’ll give you the word from the Lord; give me ten days.” He prays and he seeks God’s face. Jeremiah comes back to Johanan in chapter 42 and 43 and he says “Look, here’s God’s word to you. Submit to Babylon. Do not fear them. Serve the Lord by submitting to Babylon.” Johanan and his men wanted to flee to Egypt because they felt that was the way to escape reprisals from the Babylonians for the death of Gedaliah. Jeremiah says, “No, that’s not what God wants you to do. Stay in the land. Submit to Babylon.” Have we heard Jeremiah say that to anyone before? He said it to Zedekiah. He said it to Ishmael and to the people and they didn’t listen. He says that to Johanah and this military group that wants to go down to Egypt. In chapter 43:7 it says, “they entered into Egypt in disobedience to the word of the Lord.” It seems that they kidnapped Jeremiah and took him along.

So the purpose of this section is not to give us a day by day of the ministry of Jeremiah, it’s not even necessarily to lay that out in a strict chronology. What it’s designed to do is to say, from the very beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry until the very end of Jeremiah’s ministry there’s been one thing that has characterized that: refusal to listen to the word of God. In a sense, the fact that this is not laid out in a chronological way makes that point more effectively. It is as if: Are we ever going to get past this cycle where the people stop rebelling against the word of the Lord and listen to what God says?

Jeremiah’s Embodiment of the Word of God

Now in the stories that are told in this particular part of the book of Jeremiah the people’s disobedience to God – remember the charge – they did not listen to the word of the Lord. That disobedience is often going to be reflected in various forms of persecution that are going to be inflicted on the prophet Jeremiah. So we don’t just have stories in Jeremiah 26-45 of Jeremiah preaching the word
and the people not listening, we have stories in Jeremiah where Jeremiah preaches the word of the Lord, the people don’t listen, and then they are going to take out that unbelief on the prophet himself.

We have mentioned as we’re working through the book, various ways that Jeremiah comes to represent and embody the word of God, not just in his words, but I think in his very life. In a sense he anticipates Jesus as the incarnate word of God, because as the prophet he is a living representation of God’s word. What that means is that, when the people do not accept the word of God, the way they are often going to respond to that message is by abusing the prophet. So this is another way where we really see Jeremiah; he is a scroll. His life is a message given to the people, and in the same way Jehoiakim cut up the scrolls of his prophecies, the people are going to try and cut up the living scroll, because they don’t want to hear and accept what he has to say.

Jeremiah’s Rejection and Persecution (Jer 11, 20)

The persecution of Jeremiah, in the book, actually begins all the way back in chapter 11, verses 18-23. Remember, that’s where Jeremiah prays his first lament. In that particular passage, it’s the men of Anathoth who are conspiring to put Jeremiah to death, and Jeremiah is praying for God to avenge himself on his enemies. Here’s the starting point, and we might get an idea here of what things are going to be like in the days ahead for Jeremiah, and the people in his own home town. In this small tiny village, they are the ones who initially want to put Jeremiah to death. A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, and Jeremiah is going to experience that in his own life; Jesus went through this as well, but right away there’s opposition. In the call of Jeremiah, Jeremiah had learned from God, “I’m going to make you like a bronze wall; I’m going to make you like a fortified city.” That should have informed him right away, this is not going to be easy.

So the first form of persecution is in chapter 11, in chapter 20, after the sign act where Jeremiah smashes the pot in verses 1-6, a priest by the name of Passhur,
has Jeremiah beat and put in the stocks.

That’s really the prelude to various types of opposition that Jeremiah is going to experience in chapters 26-45. So as you are reading these stories you will find that Jeremiah is going through all kinds of things where physically he is either threatened or abused because his life represents the word of God. The people hate that message, they don’t want to accept it, they are going to reflect that in their treatment of the prophet.

Examples of Jeremiah’s Being Rejected

Here are some examples; quick overview and a quick survey, chapter 26, Jeremiah preaches the Temple Sermon. I believe we have here an alternate version of the message he preached in chapter 7. The immediate response of both the leaders and the people, “this man should die because he has prophesied against God’s house.”

In chapter 27 and 28, Jeremiah is preaching about the subjugation of Jerusalem, and he’s wearing the wooden yoke symbolizing the bondage of the people to Babylon. He is immediately opposed by Hananiah, who comes and breaks the yoke and says within two years the Babylonian crisis is going to be over. Jeremiah is going to be countered and opposed by Hananiah.

In chapter 29, even though he’s not even living there, Jeremiah is opposed by the false prophets who are living in Babylon. We have in chapters 27-29, this sort of literary thing going on it is what I call “prophetic mirroring.” Hananiah imitates the example of Jeremiah. He speaks in the name of the Lord; Jeremiah also speaks in the name of the Lord. Jeremiah preforms the sign act with the yoke; Hannania preforms the sign act with the yoke. We have the same thing going on in chapter 29, Jeremiah sends a letter to the exiles, telling them that they’re going to have to settle down and live in Babylon because God has determined that the exile is going to last for 70 years. We have a false prophet by the name Shemaiah who writes a letter back in the other direction saying that Jeremiah needs to be put in prison and censured. So there’s another act of prophetic mirroring, Jeremiah a
letter, Shemaiah writes a letter. So there’s going to be all kinds of opposition.

Chapter 32, Jeremiah is in prison, in the last days, in various forms of imprisonment. How does all this chronologically fit together? One writer said he goes from prison to another, from one location to another, and we don’t always know exactly where these places are or how they fit together. Prisons provide the backdrop for much of Jeremiah’s ministry.

Chapter 36, Jeremiah’s scroll is read at the temple, Jeremiah has to go into hiding. Baruch has to go into hiding. When they take the scroll and read it to Jehoiakim and Jehoiakim takes a knife and cuts it up the scroll piece by piece and throws it into the fire. If Jehoiakim had been able to get his hands on Jeremiah, he would have done the same thing to him.

Chapter 37, Jeremiah is put in prison because he is accused of being ready to desert over to the Babylonians. “We know what you’re going to do, you’re going to run over to the other side. We’ll put you in prison to make sure that doesn’t happen.” You kind of wonder why didn’t they just let him go?

In chapter 38, Jeremiah is thrown into a cistern by military officers and they leave him there to die. Zedekiah goes along with this, because they’re accusing Jeremiah of being a traitor who is weakening the war effort. After a foreigner by the name of Ebed-Melek convinces the king to get Jeremiah out of the cistern, they put him back in prison.

Jeremiah is in prison until the capture of the city and it’s the Babylonians that release and let him go. But then finally, in chapter 43 after he tells Johanan and the military officers “don’t go down to Egypt,” they take him by force, against his will with them. He’s going to finish the rest of his ministry in exile as a refugee in Egypt. Jeremiah encounters and experiences all of those kinds of things again.

The purpose here is not biography, the purpose is not to say let me tell you a story about a guy who went through more suffering than you can possibly imagine, the stories to say look at the hostility that Jeremiah encountered as he preached the word of God again and again. The recurring type-scene is God is
going to confront the people with a message from the prophet, God is going to go to the king with the message from the prophet, God is going to go to military officers with the message from the prophet. Again and again and again he experiences some form of persecution or opposition.

The Jehoiakim Framework

We’ve stressed that the structure and the design of this section of the book is not chronological. There are parts that are, 37-44, but overall the structure is not chronological. I want to just give you one possible suggestion here, that I think there is a possible structure that does give some order and design. In fact the structure is put in place as a way of helping us to interpret the life of Jeremiah. In the same way that we have these, prose sermons in Jeremiah 1-25 that are sort of sign posts that summarize the message of Jeremiah, I believe there are structural passages that are sort of an interpretive grid for us as we are reading, these different stories about the life and ministry of Jeremiah. These stories that provide sort of this interpretive grid are what I refer to as “the Jehoiakim framework.”

Let me explain what that means. As I’m reading through these stories and all these different accounts and episodes from Jeremiah’s life, what I notice is that there are only four chapters that specifically deal with events from the reign of King Jehoiakim. Remember who he is? He is Jeremiah’s prime antagonist; they really do not like each other. Jehoiakim, represents, maybe the most serious antagonist to the word of God. He puts to death the prophet Uriah, chapter 26. He cuts up the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies. He demands the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch. They’re enemies. So, what I believe is going on is that these four stories or episodes or messages from the time of Jehoiakim provide a frame around chapters 26-45.

Here’s where these stories are found. There is a story that is relayed from the time of Jehoiakim, chapter 26, verse 1. There is another passage in chapter 35, verse 1, that is given a heading dated to early in the reign of Jehoiakim, same expression that is in 26:1. There is another Jehoiakim episode in chapter 36, verse
1 from the fourth year of Jehoiakim. And then finally, in chapter 45, at the very end of this section, again 45:1: “an oracle from the fourth year from Jehoiakim.” So, obviously, we see that there’s a Jehoiakim story, chapter 26 at the beginning and there’s a Jehoiakim oracle, in chapter 45, at the end. And then there’s one in chapters 35 and 36.

So, I believe what we have going on here is that in, in the midst of something that looks kind of disorderly to us, and out of order, this frame divides Jeremiah 26-45 into two sections or panels that are designed to both parallel and contrast with each other. We have one panel in chapter 26 that ends in chapter 35. We have a second panel that begins in chapter 36 and goes until chapter 45.

Now, as English writers and English composers, if we were writing a story about Jeremiah’s life, we wouldn’t structure the story this way. But, in an oral culture, where often these stories were read or told orally, perhaps what we have going on here, is a form of parallelism, where chapters 26-35 are going to parallel each other. There are similarities between this section and the second section in chapters 36-45.

Additionally, there are also some contrasts in chapters 26-35 that are going to be important when we compare it to 36-45. We take a story and we plow from the beginning to the end. What I think Hebrew narrative often does, is that it tells the story in panels, and uses narrative parallelism and repetition. I believe that we’re going to see some forms of that as we look at this particular section of the book.

Function of the Jehoiakim Framework

What does this Jehoiakim framework do for our understanding of the message of chapters 26-45. Well, I think it conveys a couple of important things. Number one, it reminds us that the time of Jehoiakim’s reign was a decisive moment in Judah’s history. When this man rejects the word of the Lord after the Temple Sermon, when this King, who was the leader of God’s people, when he cuts up the scroll of Jeremiah that is a decisive act of rebellion against the Lord.
So, in a sense we view this as a watershed moment, the closing down of the opportunities to repent. In many ways, Jehoiakim’s life and his reign is the time when Judah moves from possible repentance to irrevocable judgment.

Now, also remember that in chapter 36 and chapter 45, there is a specific time in Jehoiakim’s ministry, or Jehoiakim’s reign, 605 BC, is the year that the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish. It’s also the year that the first wave of the exiles is taken away back to Babylon. This is a decisive moment. And so, I believe the Jehoiakim framework is partly here to remind us, that this time they passed from possible repentance to irrevocable and inevitable judgment. I think that the reign of Jehoiakim when he formally rebels against the word of God, as it was preached in the Temple Sermon, and then as it was written in the scrolls, that’s a decisive moment.

Now, to add to the significance of this, and I think to further validate how the writer is the portraying this is a critical moment, listen to chapter 25, verse 1, which concludes the first major section of the book. It says in 25:1, “The word that came to Jeremiah, concerning all of the people of Judah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah.” So, the concluding message that wraps all of the judgment that we see in chapters 1-25, when did it happen? The fourth year of Jehoiakim. In that passage, God announces how he is sending the Babylonians, and how there’s going to be 70 years of exile. This is the first year, where the exiles are going to be taken away and Jeremiah is laying out in the, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, this is what’s going to follow. This is a decisive moment in Judah’s history.

So, the fourth year of Jehoiakim closes the first section of the book, chapter 25. It introduces the second section of the book chapter 26. It concludes the second section of the book, chapter 45. Then listen to what it says in chapter 46, verse 1, in the third section of the book that introduces the oracles against the nations. I bet you can’t possibly imagine what time period is going to be mentioned in 46:1.

Now here’s the third section: “The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the
prophet concerning the nations.” And, it says about Egypt, “concerning the army of Pharaoh Necho, the King of Egypt, which was defeated by the River Euphrates at Carchemish, and which Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah the King of Judah.”

So, I believe that Jehoiakim framework, takes these stories from various periods of Jeremiah’s ministry and life, and it puts a frame around them to say, think about this. Jehoiakim’s life and Jehoiakim’s reign, when he was the king, and when he rejected the word of the Lord, that cast the die for the people of Judah. In the sense, that was the last straw. There had been other last straws in the past. Micah had announced judgment and God relented when Hezekiah repented. Manasseh did more evil than all kings that came before him- “I’m going to wipe Jerusalem like a dish” - God relented through the reforms of Josiah. But with Jehoiakim, there’s a final rejection of God, or the final rejection of God’s word, and the die is cast and judgment is going to happen. I think the Jehoiakim framework makes that point.

First Panel (Jer 26-35)

Now there’s a second thing that the Jehoiakim framework does for us, as we look at these two sections. It divides 26 to 45 into chapters 26 to 35 and then 36 to 45. So let’s look at the first panel. There’s a movement here. In chapter 26 verse 3 at the beginning of panel one, the reason that Jeremiah is going to preach his Temple Sermon here it is: “It may be that they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way that I may relent of the disaster that I intended to Judah.”

There is the possibility (ulai) maybe they will listen and I can relent, so there is the possibility in chapter 26 that all of the judgments that are going to be carried out against Judah, if the people will listen, then maybe God will relent from sending the judgment. So what happens is with all of these examples of how they did not listen they obviously missed the opportunity.

At chapter 35 we come to the end of panel one and here’s what it says, verse 15 to verse 17, “I have sent you all of my servants, the prophets, sending
them persistently saying turn now everyone of you from his evil way and amend your deeds and do not go after the other gods and serve them.” Remember, that’s what he’s saying in 26--change your ways maybe you can be spared from judgment. Verse 17 though, here’s their response, “Therefore, thus says the Lord the God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Behold, I am bringing upon Judah and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the disaster that I have pronounced against them because I have spoken to them and they have not listened,’” [shama] they didn’t obey “I have called to them and they have not answered.” So what happens in panel one of the Jeremiah narratives of 26 to 35 in this first panel? They have an opportunity to hear but at the end they have not listened and God is going to judge them.

Second Panel (Jer 36-45)

That same movement is going to reflected in the second panel in chapters 36 to 45. So let’s go to the second panel it’s introduced by the statement, “In the fourth year of Jehoiakim,” the writing out of the scroll. Why is Jeremiah going to do this, verse 3 “It may be [perhaps (ulai)] that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.” So it’s four years later from chapter 26 maybe they’ll relent; maybe they’ll turn away and I won’t have to send the judgment. There is the possibility at the beginning of the second panel of being spared from judgment.

How does that work out? Well, we go to chapter 44 verses 16 to 18 at the end of the second panel, are the people going to listen to word of God? Here’s the response of the Jewish refugees that are in Egypt and you remember what they say, verse 16, “As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you. But we do everything we have vowed, making our offerings to these pagan gods [Hey, we’re not going to listen to you Jeremiah].” So the same movement that we have in the first panel is reflected in the second. It begins with the possibility of repentance and being spared from judgment. It ends
with the people not listening to the word of God and experiencing national doom.

So the LORD says at the end of chapter 44 verse 26, “I have sworn by my great name, says the LORD, that my name shall no more be invoked by the people of Judah” and I’m going to bring absolute destruction on these refugees that are living in Egypt. Only a handful of them will ever return to the land.

So what we have going on here, the Jehoiakim framework does a couple of things; number one, it shows us that the time of Jehoiakim was a turning point; it was a watershed moment. Number two, it also does the same thing that we’ve seen in the first half of the book of Jeremiah. There was an opportunity to repent and to be spared and we see the closing down of that in chapters 26 to 35. We see the closing down of that again in 36 to 45, and by not doing this in a strictly chronological way, but by laying it out in parallel panels we get to see the repetitiousness of this.

It’s just like in chapters 1 to 25, remember what happens there? It begins with repeated and recurring calls to return to the LORD. Those return calls gradually diminish and disappear and in the midst of this there are the two visits to the potter. You can still change. You can still revise. You’re still wet clay in the hand of God. Second visit to the potter--you’re a fixed vessel that is going to be smashed. All throughout the book there is the closing down of the opportunities to repent. So the Jehoiakim framework helps us to see that.

Finally, there’s one last thing in the Jehoiakim framework. In the first section in chapters 26 to 35 we have the promise of restoration in chapters 32 to 33, referred to as the Book of Consolation. We’ve been focusing so much on judgment we haven’t really talked about that, but in the midst of all this national disobedience there are also the promises of restoration. In light of the disobedience that comes before it and the disobedience that comes after, it this is a pretty significant thing.

So this is what God is planning to do in the aftermath of exile when he restores his people. There is a very interesting contrast; however, between that and
what we see in the second panel in chapters 40 to 43, where in the aftermath of exile there is more disobedience, more judgment, and more wrath from God because the people have not listened. There is going to be a restoration, but it’s not going to appear in the near future. It’s not going to take place during the life and times of Jeremiah. It’s going to be something in the distant future, but God will bring his people back.

Jeremiah chapter 26 to 45 we have stories and very good ones, very interesting ones, about Jeremiah preaching the word of God and their reaction and response to that. From all different time periods in Jeremiah’s ministry and there’s hostility, there’s rejection, there’s indifference, there’s persecution of the prophet, and ultimately the rejection of the word of God. That is why the judgment of Judah is ultimately to come.

Practical Application

In the practical application of this I am reminded from the stories of Jeremiah’s life how we respond to God’s word is the most important and decision we’ll ever make. Listening to God’s word is a matter of life and death. The book of Jeremiah is about the word of the LORD, its power to bring death, but also its power to bring life, but ultimately it depends on our response. I hope as we study through this that the negative ways that Judah responded to Jeremiah’s message and to the word of the Lord will be a reminder to us that finding real life comes from listening to God and responding in obedience to his word and the message he’s conveyed to us in his written word in the same way that he spoke to the people in Jeremiah’s day through the prophet and through his spoken word.
The Unbelief of Jehoiakim

The Paradigm of Disobedience (Jer 26, 36)

This is Dr. Gary Yates and his teaching on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number 20 “Jehoiakim: the paradigm of disobedience in Jeremiah chapter 26 and 36.”

The title of our lesson is “The Unbelief of Jehoiakim.” We’re going to be looking specifically in the segment at two chapters: Jeremiah 26 and 36. In our previous lesson we looked at the second section of the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah 26-45. We saw that in contrast to the messages of judgment in the first half of the book, this section focuses on the life of Jeremiah and more than just a biography it gives a theological statement about how the people of Judah, the kings, the leadership, responded to the word of God. We saw that the recurring problem is that throughout this section it tells us that the people, the kings, the leaders, military officials did not listen, they did not obey the word of God.

Jehoiakim Literary Frame

We also saw that there is a Jehoiakim frame around chapters 36 to 45 that I believe helps us to have an interpretive grid to understand this section of the book. There is a Jehoiakim episode or message in chapters 26 and chapter 35. So we have one panel of this part of the book that goes from chapters 26 to 35. There’s another Jehoiakim episode in chapter 36. Then there is a message from the time of Jehoiakim in chapter 45 and that provides the second panel 36-45.

We saw that those sections parallel one another. They’re designed to demonstrate that the time of Jehoiakim was a watershed moment. In the chapters we are looking at today, we see how the unbelief of Jehoiakim really sets in stone and makes God’s judgment of Judah not something that is just a possibility, but
something that God begins to warn is irrevocable and is going to happen because
the king has rejected God’s word. We really see two stories of unbelief, rejection,
and the king’s ultimate antagonism to the message of prophets like Jerimiah.

**Four Parallels Between Jeremiah 26 and 36**

Now it’s interesting that these two sections chapters 26 and 36 introduce
the two panels in the second half of the book because in many ways these two
stories very closely parallel one another. There are four specific parallels that I
would like to note and then we’re going to get into the specifics of each chapter.

The first parallel is the time of the two narratives that we’ve already
mentioned. They are both from the time of Jehoiakim chapter 26:1 says that the
first episode occurs early in the reign of Jehoiakim. He reigns from 609 to 597 BC.
So, sometime early in his reign, Jeremiah preaches this “Temple Sermon” that is
ultimately going to demonstrate the unbelief of the king. Then in chapter 36:1 it
says at that the time that God commanded Jerimiah put his messages in a scroll
and had them read them in the temple that’s chapter 36:1.

The second parallel is that the setting of the stories, both of them take place
at the Jerusalem temple. The first passage is the story about Jeremiah’s “Temple
Sermon.” Again I think this is a second version of the sermon we read about in
chapter seven. The sermon in chapter seven focuses more on the message of
Jeremiah. He’s warning them to not put their trust in the temple in the Lord, and if
they do not amend and change their ways, then God is going to do the same thing
to Jerusalem and to his house there that he did in Shiloh back in the time of the
judges. In the second story God commands Jeremiah to have Baruch go to the
temple and read the scroll there. So, both of these both of these passages are going
to take place in the temple. I believe that particular setting adds weight and
seriousness to both of these stories. The temple was the place where the people of
Judah met with God; it was God’s dwelling place. So when the prophet comes
there with a warning of judgment, it’s something that needs to be taken seriously,
because this is God’s dwelling place. If you’re going to live in God’s presence, if
you’re going to dwell in God’s presence and enjoy his blessings and benefits as part of the covenant, then you need to meet the responsibilities that God places on those who come into his presence.

Thirdly, both of these are stories, and this fits with the overall message of chapters 26-45, that focus on response to the prophetic word. In chapter 26, Jeremiah delivers an oral sermon. There are going to be various groups of people who have their opinion and their response. In a sense, there is a debate about the message of Jeremiah but it’s going to involve the prophets and the priests as the religious officials. It’s going to involve the people as they’re taking sides in this story. It’s also going to involve the civil leaders, the elders and the officials and their involvement in this as well.

In the second account, in chapter 36, Jeremiah’s scroll is read at the temple by Baruch and again various people are going to respond to this. Baruch reads this in the presence of all the people so what’s their response going to be? There are a group of officials and scribes who hear that message and take it seriously. So there’s their interaction and their feedback message. Then, finally, the message is taken to the king and to his officials and to his servants and we have their response to the message as well.

The fourth and final parallel between these two stories is these are stories that basically have the same structure. They have the warnings of the prophets about judgment. Jeremiah is a prophet of judgment because the people have not lived up to their covenant responsibilities. The prophet is warning them of the judgment that is coming, there is a response of rejection to that message in some way in some aspect. Then as a result of that there is an announcement of judgment. So it’s very appropriate that these two passages, that these two narratives, introduce the two primary blocks in the book in the second half of Jeremiah because their very similar to each other.

Jehoiakim is the featured individual here. Louis Stuhlman makes this comment about Jehoiakim, “Jehoiakim becomes in the book of Jeremiah a
prototype of infidelity and disobedience who is afforded every opportunity to hear, but instead chooses to disobey.” So think of the fact that this is the heritage, this is the legacy, that Jehoiakim leaves behind. I think about it that as we read the stories of the kings as well in the books of Samuel and Kings it’s going to tell us that the king did either what was evil in the eyes of the Lord or was right in the eyes of the Lord. In the Northern Kingdom of Israel there are zero kings that ultimately the narrator assesses by “he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.” Even in the line of David it is a minority of those kings that did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. So Kings is a historical account, while it is a historical account it also reminds us that their political successes, their military accomplishments, what the economy of the nation was at the time of their rule and reign, the length or the duration of their reign, the respect that people had for them or the disrespect that the people had that’s ultimately not the issue. The ultimate issue is: what’s the Lord’s assessment of what this king did.

For Jehoiakim and in fact, the four kings that come at the end of Judah in Jeremiah’s ministry the assessment for all of them is that they did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. We see that especially Jehoiakim. He is incredibly antagonistic and hostile to the message. There is never a time Jehoiakim and Jeremiah meet face to face and anytime we see Jehoiakim reacting or responding to the word of God in the book of Jeremiah it’s with anger, it’s with hostility, and it’s even with violence toward the prophetic messengers.

**Jeremiah 26**

So let’s go to the story in chapter 26. Again we get a very brief summary of the message, and if this is not the same message of the Temple Sermon and it’s not the same occasion then it’s a very similar message. Jeremiah may have preached more than one time. But here’s what Jeremiah said: the Lord sends him to preach about the Lord’s judgment, “the Lord says ‘it may be that they will listen, and everyone will turn form his evil ways and I may relent of the disaster that I intended to do to them because of their evil deeds.’
Key Terms

A couple of things that are going on here, remember in the Jehoiakim sections 26 to 35 and then 36 to 45. At the beginning of these two panels, there’s the opportunity that in this stage of Jeremiah’s ministry the people could be spared from judgment. If they will shub – a key theological word in the book – if they will turn around, if they will turn from their evil ways then there is always the possibility that God will relent, naham, God will change his mind and God will not send the disaster against them.

There’s another word play in all of this that I think is important. The prophets are going to confront the people with the fact that they are doing evil. The Hebrew word is ra’ah or ra’. So the people are doing evil and as a result of that God is intending to bring calamity or disaster which is also the word ra’a or ra’. So the Lord is going to give them a punishment that fits the crime. They are doing rah-ah so God is preparing to send ra’a, calamity or disaster against them. But if they will have the right response then the Lord will not send the judgment and the disaster that he’s planned. These are not things that are fixed in stone. These are not things that at this point are irrevocably going to happen. If there’s a right response to God then there’s the chance that the Lord may relent and not send the judgment.

But what we’re going to see in both of these panels in 26 to 35 is that opportunity is presented at the beginning of the panel but then at the end of the panel, first panel chapter 35 there’s a national judgment. They are not going to take advantage of the opportunity that the Lord is going to give them. Chapter 36; ulai, perhaps, maybe they will respond. I will relent, maybe they will turn and do what God asks of them. But at the end of the section in chapter 44 we have the rebellion, the refugees that are living down in Egypt: “we will not listen to the Lord, will we not obey, we’re going to continue to offer our sacrifices and pay our vows to the false gods.” As a result of that, God is going to send national judgment. Throughout this section, we are reminded of the urgency of God’s
The book of Jeremiah is a story about what happens to the word of God as it is proclaimed by Jeremiah. It is about the power of the word of God to bring judgment when people reject it, and the power of the word of God to create new life out of a desperate situation. But listening to God’s word is a matter of life and death. In the first section of the book we have the closing down of the hope and the opportunity that Judah is going to repent and be spared from judgment. We see the same thing in the second half here. So God tells Jeremiah to go to the temple, proclaim this message. Here’s what he’s to say in verse four: “You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord: If you will listen to me, walk in my law that I have set before you, and listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh and I will make this city accursed from all the nations of the earth.” That effectively summarizes exactly what we see in chapter 7. The issue here is what’s the response?

The Verdict on Jeremiah’s Validity as a Prophet

This passage, some people have actually explained this almost as a formal courtroom—a legal proceeding that is designed to resolve the issue of Jeremiah’s validity as a prophet. So how’s this going to turn out? There’s going to be various people that weigh in on this. Is Jeremiah recognized as a true, valid prophet of the Lord? That really is the tension that is raised by this narrative and the debate over this begins in verse 7. So listen to the people that weigh in. First of all, it says, “the priest and the prophets and all of the people.” The religious officials and the people are going to be the first ones that weigh in on this and their response to this is that after Jeremiah finishes the priest, the people, and the prophets are going to say, “You shall die.” So the first legal verdict that’s going to be given here: Jeremiah deserves to die.

The prophet has announced the coming doom and the destruction of Jerusalem. Their response to that is: “We don’t need to respond to the message,
we need to put to death the messenger.” I think there’s a very strong possibility here that they believe that Jeremiah is to be put to death as a false prophet as the book of Deuteronomy lays out because he has dared to speak against the house of the Lord. Their theology is built around the ideas that God is going to bless his people, God is going to protect them no matter what, God has made a commitment to the house of David, and God has made a commitment to his people to protect them, to watch over them. They can’t even imagine that a true prophet would speak judgment and that’s the question they raise. Verse 9, “Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord saying, ‘This house shall be like Shiloh and this city shall be desolate without inhabitant’? And all of the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord.”

One answer to this could be, “Well, we could go back to our past traditions, read the story of Shiloh and what God did there.” But they’re so committed to their idea that God is going to bless them no matter what, that even that example has not gotten through to them. So, the first verdict that’s given here is that Jeremiah deserves to die.

Now, the second response; now we have some civil officials who are going to respond to this and the people are going to get involved in this. What verse 10 says, “When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king’s house to the house of the Lord and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the Lord.” So it does in some way here seem like, really, almost a formal legal proceeding. Let’s resolve this issue about whether we should listen to this message or not.

Now here again, “Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to the people, ‘This man deserves a sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city.’” So again, it’s the prophets and the priests, it’s the religious leaders that are causing the most objection to Jeremiah’s message. But notice now that they are saying this to the officials and the people. So it’s going to be, in a sense here, I think, the officials and the people that are ultimately going to resolve
This.

**Jeremiah’s Defense**

As part of the proceeding, Jeremiah is going to speak on his own behalf, finally, in verse 12. Basically, what Jeremiah’s going to say here is: “The Lord has sent me to preach this message.” You are wanting to put to death the messenger, but remember this message is coming from the Lord and it’s something that you need to take seriously. So, he’s going to preach his message all over again. Verse 13: “Now, therefore, mend your ways and your deeds and obey the voice of the Lord your God and the Lord will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you.” Again, another opportunity is placed in front of them. If they will repent, then God will relent.

“But as for me, behold, I am in your hands – do with me what seems good and right to you – only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourself.” If we’re to look at this as sort of a formal legal proceeding, Jeremiah says, “If you pass a death sentence on me, you’re going to be guilty before God of putting his messenger to death, and of putting to death innocent blood. You’re going to be held accountable for that because I’ve simply told you what the Lord has told me to say.”

**The Third Response to Jeremiah: Vindicated**

So now, in verse 16 to 19, the third cycle of this response to Jeremiah and his message. Notice who is going to talk here: “Then all of the officials and all of the people” – so now the people are over on this side with the officials – “said to the priest and the prophets.” Here is their verdict: “This man does not deserve the sentence of death for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.” So they validate (remember its 609 B.C., somewhere around there) they validate Jeremiah as a true prophet of God, and notice who it is that does this: the officials, who later on, as we get near the time of the fall and of the demise of Judah and of the destruction of Jerusalem, the officials of the king are going to be the ones that oppose Jeremiah, but at this point the officials say, and the people agree with
them, “This man is a true prophet of God.”

What evidence do they present, was it just they were persuaded by the words Jeremiah said here? They’re convinced by the message. They go back to a historical precedent, and remember, Jeremiah’s already done this: “If you think that Jerusalem is not going to be destroyed, let’s go back to the historical precedent of Shiloh. What did the Lord do to his house there?” Well, the reason that the officials and the people ultimately are convinced that Jeremiah is a true prophet is, again, they go back to historical precedent. The historical precedent for them, is the ministry and the message of the prophet Micah, and the response that king Hezekiah had to that particular preacher of judgment the century before Jeremiah.

**Micah of Moresheth and Hezekiah’s Response to God’s Word**

We’ve talked about this in one of the previous sessions. We were talking about the response to the prophetic word, but listen to what the elders say: “Micah of Moresheth,” this is verse 18, “prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah: ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height’” (Jer. 26:18).

We have here an interesting example of intertextuality between the prophetic books. There is a citation here, and a quotation of Micah 3:12. Micah said that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed, in other words, a century ago a prophet came and was giving us exactly the same warning as the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah stands in the tradition of the prophets of judgment. When these prophets of judgment come along and speak a word to us, we’d do well to consider what they say. The response that Hezekiah had should be a lesson to us. They say in verse 19, “Did Hezekiah king of Judah or all of Judah put him to death?” And the answer is, “No.” It says: “Did not Hezekiah fear the Lord and seek his favor? And did not the Lord relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he had pronounced against them?” When this prophet of judgment came along,
warned the people of the judgment that was coming. Hezekiah repented, the people sought God, and there was a turning to God that led to the Lord not sending the judgment that he had threatened. This goes back to the theology of Jeremiah chapter 18. Whenever a prophet announces something good or something disastrous that’s about to come upon people, the Lord doesn’t send that just to announce to them what he’s going to do no matter what. The Lord is announcing his intentions. Even if there is not an explicit condition attached to that, a condition is usually implicit. Unless the Lord says, “Look, I’m going do this, I’m not going turn, I’ve sworn an oath, I’m not going change,” the Lord is going to give people the possibility and opportunity to respond to his message, and if they do then the Lord is going to relent.

So that’s what happened in the days of Hezekiah, he responded to God’s message in the right way, and the Lord relented, he changed his mind and did not send the judgment. The elders and the officials and the people are saying “We at least need to take Jeremiah’s word seriously, and to put him to death would ultimately bring disaster upon ourselves.” So the end of this debate, this, really in a sense, a formal legal proceeding at the temple has evaluated and assessed the credibility of Jeremiah and the validity of his ministry and his message. The verdict officially of both the civil leaders of Judah and the people of Judah is that this man is a true prophet of God and we need to take his warnings seriously. The conclusion of all of this is we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves if we put Jeremiah to death. Jeremiah is validated as a prophet.

Now I think it’s very interesting that in a section in the book of Jeremiah dealing with how the people did not listen to the word of God, a recurring type scene takes place where the prophet delivers a message and that message is rejected, it’s very interesting that the first story there validates Jeremiah’s message. The people themselves along with the leaders confirm that Jeremiah is a true prophet of God. What this does is makes them even more culpable and guilty for the fact that they don’t listen to what Jeremiah says. There’s so much cognitive
dissidence going on here because first of all they said to Jeremiah, “How can you preach judgment against God’s house?” Jeremiah says “Think about your own history, go back to Shiloh,” but there is also the fact that these people have recognized Jeremiah as a true prophet of God. If that’s the case where is the revival, the reform, the renewal that’s going to take place? This scene at the very beginning of chapters 26-45 makes the people and the leaders of Judah all the more guilty for the fact that they didn’t listen to Jeremiah’s message and they didn’t respond in a positive way.

Now you’re saying, “I thought this was a section of the book that was talking about the rejection of Jeremiah’s message. Everything that you have read so far seems to be validating Jeremiah. There’s an introductory story here about the acceptance of Jeremiah’s message.” But as we’ve worked our way through the narrative, and all the people who have responded to this, there’s one person that’s missing. We’ve seen the response of the prophets, the priests, we’ve seen the people and their response and they seem to be somewhat fickle because they start out on the side of the priests and the prophets who are angry and say that Jeremiah needs to die. They come over to the side of the officials and the elders who say that this man is not deserving of death, but in the midst of all of this and the different audiences and the different groups that are responding, the one person that is not involved here, for whatever reason, is Jehoiakim, the king.

**Jehoiakim’s Response: Uriah**

What’s his verdict on the message of Jeremiah? Well, he’s not involved in this scene, but what the narrator does, really an effective thing here, is he puts in an appendix to the story. He begins by telling us there was a courtroom scene at the temple that officially validated Jeremiah as a prophet, so the nation is going to listen to him. And the answer to that is: “no,” because the king himself is absolutely hostile, and absolutely unwilling to hear anything that these prophets of judgment have to say. So what happens in verses 20-24 is that we have an appended story of another episode that deals with king Jehoiakim’s response to the
prophetic word of a prophet by the name of Uriah.

Uriah may not be a name we’re familiar with, he’s not a prophet whose words are included in the canon of Scripture, but like Jeremiah he was preaching a message for the people of Judah that was exactly the same as that of Jeremiah. He’s saying the exact same thing to them. You need to repent, you need to change, God is preparing to send judgment. Jehoiakim, when he hears that message, becomes angry. The royal response is such that Uriah knows that the king is trying to put him to death, and he flees and he escapes to Egypt. So that is the same place that ultimately Jeremiah’s going to end up.

But Jehoiakim doesn’t stop there, he doesn’t say “Well, we got rid of him, we sent him off to Egypt.” He actually uses his diplomatic and political connections with Egypt to send his officials down to Egypt. They take Uriah, they bring him back it says in verse 23, “They took Uriah out of Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who had him struck down with a sword and his body was dumped into the burial place of the common people.” It says that Jehoiakim is directly involved in putting the prophet to death, and by his response here he demonstrates that he is the paradigmatic example of unbelief in the book of Jeremiah.

The validity of Jeremiah’s message, the warnings that Jeremiah is bringing about judgment, the people and officials in chapter 26, they don’t know how all of this is going to unfold. The Babylonians haven’t even come at this time. But they’re saying, “At least we need to take seriously warnings of judgment. We need to step aside and assess our lives and where we stand with God, and are we being faithful to the covenant, because remember what Hezekiah did.” Jehoiakim doesn’t want to do any of that sort of assessment, he acts in anger and in indignation. So this story that seems to begin so positively, so maybe the people and maybe the nation, maybe the leaders are going to respond in a proper way, chapter 26 casts the die, Jehoiakim is a man who will not respond to God, who will not obey, and as a result of that God is not going to relent from the judgment
that he sends.

Remember in each of the panels in chapters 26-35 and 36-45 it begins with a possibility, *ulai* “perhaps” the people will respond properly and God will spare the judgment. But we really don’t need to get to the end of the section to find out what’s going to happen, in the very first story the unbelief, the rejection of the word of God, the disobedience of the king reflects what these two panels are going demonstrate to us. God brings judgment against Judah because of their disobedience that’s reflected in the life of the king.

**Jeremiah 36: opening the Second Panel**

So that’s the opening to the first panel chapter 26, when we go to the opening of the second panel. This parallel passage in chapter 36 we’re going to see another pretty obvious example of Jehoiakim’s blatant hostility to the word of the Lord. Again we’re going to have a very brief summary of Jeremiah’s message and the issue is going to be: how do the people respond? God has Jeremiah dictate this message, the words of Jeremiah are the words of the Lord. The words of Baruch are the words of Jeremiah that are the words of the Lord. But again there is the possibility raised at the very beginning here that maybe this message and maybe these warnings of judgment if the people will listen, *shama‘*, and if they will turn, *shub*, from their evil ways there is the possibility that God will relent, *naham*, and not send judgment against his people.

Chapter 36 verse 3 says this: “Write these words down and announce and summarize all the messages of judgment that I have given. It may be that the house of Judah will hear of all of the *ra‘a*, disaster, the calamity, that I intend to do to them so that everyone will turn from his *ra‘a*, evil way and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.” When Jeremiah gets ready to send Baruch to the temple with this message, think about the courage it’s going to take for Baruch to deliver this. It’s too hot a message for Jeremiah to come out of hiding, so Baruch gets to be the messenger. But why is he doing all this? Verse 7: “It may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord and that everyone will turn from
his ra’a, evil way. For great is the anger and the wrath that God has pronounced against this people.” So that’s why Baruch goes to the temple.

This is a short summary of what this is all about. It’s the warnings of judgment. Chapters 1-25 may reflect for us something of what this scroll was like. After the scroll was destroyed it says that many similar words were added to it but perhaps the scroll that Baruch goes to the temple to read is something very similar to what we have in chapters 1-25.

**Jeremiah 36: People’s Response**

Now the question becomes, just like in chapter 26, what’s the response to the message? And again we’re going to have these various voices that are going to weigh in. First of all, let’s think about the response of the people, how did the people themselves respond? Verse 9, we’ve got a couple of insights into this. “In the 5th year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah (605 BC is the year) all of the people in Jerusalem and all of the people who came from the cities of Judah to Jerusalem proclaimed a fast before the Lord.” So Jeremiah and Baruch picked a very opportune time to bring this message. The people have already proclaimed a fast and that’s the reason they’re coming to the temple in the first place. Now Old Testament law only required the people of Israel to fast one day a year on the Day of Atonement as expression of their repentance and their confession for sin. So this is a special fast that has perhaps been proclaimed by the leaders of Judah because they realized that they are in a time of national crisis and they need God’s help.

The significance of this is that if they are fasting and if they are praying to God it seems like that they would be especially open to responding to what the prophet has to say to them. I think about the time in the post-exilic period when Ezra and Nehemiah are leading the people and Ezra reads the scroll of the Book of the Law and they read it from early in the morning until noon time, for 5 hours or 6 hours. The people stand, they listen, they are attentive to the message. But when they hear what the message has to say they are struck to the heart they begin to
weep, they begin to cry, they mourn, and they repent. Actually, Ezra and the
leaders there have to stop the mourning and say, “Hey, this is a day of
celebration,” but there is nothing here in the fasting that indicates that the people
responded in this particular way to the message of Jeremiah.

It says in verse 10, “Then in the hearing of all the people Baruch read the
words of Jeremiah from the scroll in the House of the Lord in the chamber of
Gemariah” and that’s the last time that the people are mentioned in this story. The
Word of the Lord was read in the hearing of all the people. Well, where is their
response? In chapter 26 they’re directly involved in Jeremiah’s temple sermon.
Remember they side with the prophets and the priests at the beginning who say
that Jeremiah needs to be put to death. They come over to the side of the officials
and the elders to ultimately say that Jeremiah should not be put to death, but here
we don’t have anything. The question that if I could go back and interview the
narrator I would ask is, “What was the response? What was the reaction?” By
virtue of the fact, we’re reading between the lines here a little bit, that there is no
mention of the response of the people, it sort of reflects the emptiness of the fast
that they had proclaimed. They are there doing this religious observance and
supposedly a fast was a time when you humbled yourself over sin. Here’s a
prophetic message that’s confronting them, that they’ve been listening to for 20
years and there is no response.

**Fasting in the Prophets**

There are a couple of other prophetic passages that talk about the emptiness
of fasting without a response of obedience and commitment to do what God
commands you in his word. Isaiah chapter 58 talks about this and it say this, the
Lord speaks to the people and he says, “They seek me daily and delight to know
my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and didn’t forsake the
judgment of their God.” They’re doing their religious rituals, they appear to be
very religious and that’s what we seem to have here. They appear to be very
sensitive to God, they proclaim a fast. This is a national disaster, this is a time of
crisis; we need the Lord. That’s good, but they don’t really seek to know what God’s will is in terms of living that out in their lives. “They ask for righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God,” that’s what they’re doing here.

They even ask God a question in verse 3 and I can imagine the people in Jeremiah’s audience who heard the scroll and Baruch’s audience here they would have said the same thing. “Why have we fasted and yet you do not see it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? Behold in the day of your fast.” Here is the problem. You’re upset about the fact that God is not recognizing your fast, here’s the issue: “in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and you oppress all of your workers.” You have got this national observance and you are all getting together, you’re praying and you are fasting and you’re pretending to seek God but as soon as the fast is over you go back to work and disobey the law and oppress the poor and the needy. That’s why God doesn’t pay attention to your fast. This message would have been very appropriate to the people that were there in Baruch’s audience that were hearing the scroll. “Look, you have come to fast. Let’s deal with the real issue here. You need to come back to obeying God’s word.” “Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked feast, feasting like yours this day will not make your voice be heard on high. Is this the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself?” Is that really what’s going to please God? Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? “Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord?” Yeah, just going to the temple and praying some prayers and pretending to be humbled, is that really what God wants? And the answer, of course, is, “No.” Here’s what the Lord says, Isaiah 58:6, “Is this not this the kind of fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover him? Then, if you fast in that way, will you turn back to God, take care of the needs of them, then your light shall break forth like the dawn
and your healing shall come speedily.”

There’s a similar passage to this in Zechariah 7 in the postexilic period. They had a fast where they observed the time when Jerusalem had fallen, when the temple had been destroyed. They come to the prophets, “Should we continue observing these fasts?” They’ve done that throughout the time of the exile. Zechariah says the real issue is not whether you go through the observances of the fast or not. The real issue is, are you going to obey God?

So, I think it’s just interesting here that in Jeremiah chapter 36, they’ve come to seek the Lord, to pray, to confess their sin, but yet they’re not responsive to the message of the prophet.

**Second Response: Jeremiah 36:11-20**

There’s a second response in verses 11-20 and it tells us there that, and actually this is in verses 11-18, that there are officials here who hear the message and do respond to it in a positive way. The first one is mentioned in verse 11. “When Micaiah son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan.” This family is involved in the life of Jeremiah. Back in chapter 26, when the prophet Uriah is put to death by Jehoiakim, it’s another member of the family of Shaphan that protects Jeremiah from the same thing was happening to him. So Micaiah, this member of this family is a supporter of Jeremiah. He hears the message, he takes it to other officers and scribes. They hear it, they take the word seriously and their response is, after Baruch sits down and reads it again, here’s what it says, verse 18, “When they heard all of these words, they turned to one another in fear.” When a prophet of the Lord warns you of judgment the right response is fear.

They say this message is serious we need to take it to the king. So they bring it to the king. Verse 20, the king is sitting in his comfortable palace. The firepot is burning to keep him warm. It says in verse 22, it was in the ninth month, the king was sitting in the winter house and there was fire burning in the pot before him. As they read the scroll of the prophecies to him, it tells us that Jehoiakim takes a knife and strip by strip cuts up the scroll and throws it into the
firepot. Now what was it that motivated this kind of response? Well, obviously it was his anger and hostility. But, verse 24 says this, “Yet neither the king, nor any of the servants who heard all of these words, was afraid.” So you have the scribes and the officials, they hear the warnings, they fear the Lord. They reverence God’s word. They take it seriously. Jehoiakim hears the word of the Lord, he does not fear and he commits Jeremiah’s scroll to the fire and turns it into ashes.

In some sense, I wonder if Jehoiakim doesn’t think, “Alright, if this prophet wants to condemn me with a message, let’s see whose word has power here. Let’s see who has authority here. Is it the prophet? Or is it the king?” In his royal authority and in his royal position, at the royal palace, he commits the prophet’s words to the fire. Maybe even in some sort of magical sense thinking that by destroying the message, I’ve destroyed the reality that it’s talking about. But when we come to this confrontation between prophetic power and royal power throughout the Scriptures, it’s always the prophetic power of the word of God that is going to win this battle. Jehoiakim has all the troops, all the power, all the authority, all the officials on his side. But Jeremiah has God and he has the power of God’s word.

**Power of the Word of God**

This reminds me in some sense of the confrontation between Moses and the Pharaoh back in the story of the Exodus. In Exodus chapter 10, it says that Moses comes to the Pharaoh and he says, “This is what the Lord says, let my people go.” This is the message of God, this is God’s royal decree. And then a few verses later, I believe it’s in verse 10 of that chapter, Pharaoh says, “This is what the pharaoh says, ‘Get back to work and I’m no longer going to give you straw to make your own bricks.’” So we come down to this confrontation of whose word has power. Is it the word of Moses and the word of the Lord? The pharaoh says, “I don’t know who the Lord is. What authority does this God of Israel have what authority does his word have over the word of the king of Egypt? Let’s see whose word has power.” As you work your way through the rest of the story, the Pharaoh
is going to lose really badly.

The same thing here, Jehoiakim may think that he has destroyed the word of God, he disregards it. He orders the arrest of Baruch and Jeremiah but the officials were smart enough to hide him. By the consequences of these choices are that in verse 30, Jehoiakim has brought judgment on the nation. Then there is also going to be the judgment that God brings directly on Jehoiakim himself. The Lord says this, “He will have no one to sit on the throne of David and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and to the frost by night.” I think about him sitting in the warm comfort of his palace and enjoying his royal authority, disregarding the word of God. The punishment is going to fit the crime because he is not even going to be given a decent burial. His body will be subjected to the heat and the frost and there will be no one to carry on the royal line because God is getting ready to destroy the house of David.

The response of the king is what brings judgment against the people of Judah. Jehoiakim believed that by destroying the scroll he was able to put an end to the warnings of judgment. But all that God does is simply commission Jeremiah to write another scroll. Instead of the first scroll no longer being in effect, it says, “that many similar words of judgment were added to this.” Again thinking about the process of the composition of Jeremiah, it’s likely that Jeremiah and Baruch continued to add words to revise, to reshape, to remold, to reform the message throughout the time of Jeremiah’s ministry and the remainder of his life. Until we see the book in the form that it is put in today.

Whose word has power? Is it the king? Or is it the prophet? And we’re going to understand and we definitely see from all of this that real power is in the message that the Lord communicates through his messenger and through his servant.

**Hezekiah and Jehoiakim’s opposite Responses to God’s Word**

Now remember that a part of what is going on in the stories of the kings of Judah here is, there’s this hope and this expectation that the Lord might do for the
people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day, what he did during the time of Isaiah. Maybe the Lord is going to step in at the eleventh hour and deliver Jerusalem from danger. They were hoping for that, they were expecting that. In a sense that’s what their theology really drove them to. But what the story of Jeremiah is going to say is that that kind of response is not going to be forthcoming because the response of the kings in Isaiah’s day was not the same as the response that King Jehoiakim and later King Zedekiah are going to have to the prophetic word.

In fact, let’s go back to the story of the book of Kings and the story of Isaiah and Hezekiah. Let’s think about Jehoiakim in the light of God’s dealing with the kings of Israel and Judah throughout their history. When we go back to the book of Kings it is going to tell us that there are three incomparable kings in Israel and Judah’s history. The first one is that Solomon was an incomparable king. He was incomparable in his wisdom. There was no one like him. Kings is also going to tell us that there was no one like Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18.5). He was incomparable in his faith. No one trusted the Lord like Hezekiah did when the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrians and that’s why the deliverance came in the days of Isaiah. Thirdly, it is going to tell us that there was no one like Josiah. There was no other king like him in terms of his obedience to God’s law and the reforms that Josiah brought about when the scroll of God’s law was found, Josiah took God’s law and God’s commandments seriously in a way that was true of no other king. There was no other king like Solomon, no other king like Hezekiah, and no other king like Josiah.

Those last two kings Hezekiah and Josiah are behind the scenes of what we’re reading in Jeremiah 26-36. It is significant in light of the fact that Jehoiakim is a son of Josiah. It is also significant in light of the fact that they are looking for a deliverance of Jerusalem like what was experienced by Hezekiah. The two stories that we have just read are there to say Jehoiakim was not a Hezekiah, and Jehoiakim was not a Josiah.

First of all, it is explicitly stated in chapter 26. Did not Hezekiah respond to
the word of the Lord in the days of Micah when Micah warned of the judgment. Didn’t Hezekiah fear the Lord, respond to the message and turn to the Lord in prayer and ask for God’s mercy? Yes. But immediately after we read that in chapter 26 in the very same section of verses that follow we have the story of King Jehoiakim putting Uriah to death. So the obvious idea, why isn’t there going to be a deliverance like in the days of Hezekiah, look at the response of the two kings to the word of the Lord.

**Jeremiah 36 and 2 Kings 22-23: Jehoiakim and Josiah compared**

But when we go to chapter 36 this is more implicit. There we have a contrast between Jehoiakim and Josiah. C. D. Isabel in an article in JSOT back in 1978 laid these things out and I think it’s a very helpful illustration here. He argues that the story in Jeremiah chapter 36 bears a very close relationship to the story of Josiah (2 Kings 22-23). When you compare these two passages you do see some very interesting parallels. In both stories you have the response to a newly discovered scroll. In Josiah’s case they found the Book of the Law. They had gotten so far away from God that they even lost the commandments of Moses. They discovered that and bring it to King Josiah. In Jeremiah chapter 36 the officials have heard the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies and they bring that scroll to the king. So the issue is how is the king going to respond? Both of these scrolls are words of judgment. Josiah hears the covenant curses that are found in passages like Deuteronomy 28. Jehoiakim hears the warning of the covenant curses that God is about to bring on Judah through the preaching of Jeremiah.

But the difference is the response of the two kings. It tells us in 2 Kings 22 that Josiah when he heard the warnings of judgment tore, *kara*, his garments. It also tells us that he humbled himself, he responded and pleaded and ultimately Judah was spared from judgment. Josiah and his officials feared the Lord. Then there are all kinds of positive reforms and changes that are brought about as a result of the reading of the scroll. It tells us when they bring the scroll to Jehoiakim that he cut up the scroll, *kara*. This is the same word that refers to the
tearing of Josiah’s garments in one passage is used to talk about the tearing up and destruction of the scroll in another.

It tells us that Josiah burned in the fire all the pagan implements that were used as part of Judah’s idolatress worship. It tells us in the story of Jehoiakim that he burned up the word of God and tried to do away with that. So I think there is a very close similarity and a very close parallel between 2 Kings 22-23 and Jeremiah 36 to say let’s look at these two kings. One responded in faith, fear and obedience. One acted on the message. One reacted with no fear, anger and hostility toward the word of God. Judah in Josiah’s day was spared from judgment. Judah in Jehoiakim’s day comes under a sentence of judgment because of the response of the king.

Know I want to close with an illustration from a moment in American political history. Back in the vice presidential debates in 1988, now many of you may be too young to even remember this, it’s kind of an obscure thing. But Lloyd Benson and Dan Quail were engaged in the vice presidential debate this was the presidential election between Michael Dukakis and George Bush senior. At one moment in the debate Senator Benson charged Dan Quail with being too young and too inexperienced to serve as vice president; he wasn’t qualified to the job. Quail responded by going back to the democratic candidate John F. Kennedy and pointing out that he had the same basic experience requirement, they were basically the same age and that was his response to Senator Benson’s charge. Benson, as he responded back to Quail said this, he said, “Senator Quail I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine, you are no Jack Kennedy.” Even though the Democrats lost the election that year it was a very powerful moment in that debate.

I believe the prophet Jeremiah and the narrator of these two amazing stories is pointing a finger in the face of Jehoiakin and saying, “King Jehoiakim you are no Hezekiah. King Jehoiakim you are no Josiah. I knew Josiah, Josiah was a friend of mine you are his son. You are no Josiah.” And because of the kings
response to the word of God judgment is going to come.

How we listen to God, how we respond to God is a matter of life and death. We’re going to be reminded of that again and again as we study through Jeremiah 26-45. We see that initially and right up front here with the two stories of Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 26, 36.

Transcribed by Karli Swanson, Jennie Larson, Cassidy Rowley, Rebecca Pasceri, Haley Seward, and Nick Paiva
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Introduction to the Two Panels Jer 26-35 and 36-45

We have been looking at Jeremiah 26 to 45, the second section of the book of Jeremiah, and how it’s a story of the ways and the different responses that people had to the ministry and the preaching of Jeremiah. The theological message that emerges out of this is that God brought judgment on the people of Judah, brought the judgment of exile upon Jerusalem, because of the fact that the people did not listen, they did not obey the word of the Lord that was spoken to them through Jeremiah. Throughout the book, we’re going to see statements like the Lord has repeatedly and reoccurringly sent his prophets, but the people have not listened and obeyed. We get documented evidence of that in the story of Jeremiah’s ministry in chapters 26 to 45.

Along with that, the story of the actual fall of Jerusalem that validates Jeremiah’s ministry, that proves that his warnings of judgment were something that the people should have taken seriously, and that confirms that he is a true prophet of God. We’ve looked at the structure of this section as well and seen a framework around this section through the Jehoiakim passages, chapters 26 to 35. A Jehoiakim story and an episode in 26 through 35 mark off that first panel. There is a second panel, 36 and 45, where again we have Jehoiakim narratives or episodes. Both sections are going to document that Judah did not obey and did not listen to the word of God. They missed an opportunity to be spared from judgment.

In our last section, we looked at the stories at the beginning of the framework in both sections: the disobedience of Jehoiakim after the Temple Sermon is preached and Jehoiakim’s rejection of the word of the Lord. Chapter 36 is Jehoiakim’s destruction of the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies. So at the
beginning of each one of these panels, there is the possibility that maybe the people will respond and that they will turn from their evil and God will no longer send the calamity that he’s threatened to bring against them. Both of those raise that possibility, 26:3 and 36:3, we have the word *ulai* perhaps, and the Lord expressing his willingness to relent if they will repent.

What both of these sections are going to show, 26 through 35 and 36 to 45, is the closing down of those opportunities to be spared from judgment. The time of Jehoiachin’s reign in Judah is the watershed moment. There’s still the opportunity to be spared from this judgment. God has given the people recurring opportunities, but there’s one last chance. Then, when Jehoiakim and the people reject word of the Lord, and that continues until the fall of Jerusalem, that judgment that is possible at the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry that the prophet is warning about becomes irrevocable as we move closer to time of the fall of Jerusalem.

What we have at the end of both panels is a statement of judgment on the nation at large because of the fact that they did not accept the word of the Lord. The possibility of life and death is offered at the beginning of each panel, and the result, the final response is they’re going to reject the word and it brings death. We see that in Jeremiah chapter 35; the judgment that God is going to bring against the people that are remaining in the land that are still in Judah in the final days of Jerusalem and the final days of Judah as a nation. We also see that, there is a judgment that takes in the people as a whole in Jeremiah 44. The judgment there is on the Jewish refuges that are in Egypt. They reject the word of the Lord as well. So at the beginning, maybe they will respond, maybe they will repent; at the end of each panel, now that’s not going to happen.

Listening to word of God is a matter of life and death. Moses had told the people in his day, choose for yourself either life or death. Life will come from following God’s word; death and cursing will come from those who chose to disobey his commands, and we see that working itself out in the life, ministry and preaching of Jeremiah.
Panels Close with a Remnant (Rechabites and Refugees)

But what we also have in the concluding chapters that close each of these panels, in chapter 44 or in the first section in chapters 34 and 35, and then in the second section in chapters 44 and 45 is that there are limited examples of either individuals or groups that responded positively to the word of God. They are going to be spared from the judgment. They are going to experience the gift and the reward of life because they listened to God. So in a whole, this is a really frustrating thing to look at Jeremiah’s ministry. There’s the possibility that if the people relent, they will be spared. The nation as a whole rejects that opportunity, but there is a remnant who will respond and they are going to experience the blessings that come from obeying God.

So what we have at the end of each of these panels is there is a contrast between the death of the nation and the salvation of key individuals who respond in a positive way to God or to his word. In the first panel, the positive response and the promise of life and deliverance is going to be given to a group of people called the Rechabites. That may be a group of people or name that you are completely unfamiliar with. They are a very obscure group, but they are promised life in contrast to the judgment that is going to fall on the nation as a whole.

In the second panel, we have the judgment of the refugees in Egypt. They’re going to continue in their idolatrous ways. God is not going to spare them, but we also have the salvation of an individual, a member of the faithful group. And his name is Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe. So the tragedy in all of this is that there is the possibility that the nation as a whole can experience life and blessing. The reality is that only a tiny minority of people are actually going to respond in a positive way, and they alone will be the ones that experience the blessing of salvation.

Throughout Israel’s history, we have to varying degrees, the people at large seem to be disobedient to God. They’re stiff necked. They’re rebellious. They’re hard hearted. But no matter how badly things turn in the history of Israel
and Judah, there is always a faithful remnant. In the Northern Kingdom, during the days of Ahab’s apostasy, when his wife Jezabel led the people astray into Babel worship, there are still faithful prophets in Israel, and there are still faithful servants of God. Ahab even has one of his officials, Obadiah, who is a faithful, loyal, devoted follower of the Lord. And in the last days of Judah, the nation as a whole has drifted away from God.

In Jeremiah chapter 5, the Lord imagines someone going through the city of Jerusalem and trying to find one righteous person. They can’t even find a single righteous person. Judah and Jerusalem has become even more wicked then Sodom and Gomorrah. But even in this time of national apostasy, where God has reached a point that he says, ‘I’m going to bring judgment,’ there are still some faithful individuals. Now the group that is promised salvation and deliverance in the first panel, or in chapter 35, at the conclusion of this is this group called the Rechabites.

Rechabites (Jer 35)

Let me read the opening verses of Jeremiah 35, and we will talk about the Rechabites and who they are and why they’re in this story and why they’re significant. Chapter 35 verse 1 says this: “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah.” So we’re back in the time of Jehoiakim; this is the conclusion to the frame in the first section. “Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak with them and bring to the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers; then offer them wine to drink. So I took Jaazaniah, the son of Jeremiah, the son of Habazziniah and his brothers and all his sons and the whole house of the Rechabites.” And I may have slaughtered some of those names there. “I brought them into the house of the Lord and to the chamber of sons of Hanan, the son of Igdaliah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the officials, above the chamber of Maaseiah, the son of Shallum” some of these other leaders in the sanctuary. And it says in verse 5, “Then I set before the Rechabites, pitchers full of wine, and cups, and I said to them, ‘Drink wine.’” But they answered, ‘We
will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, “You shall not drink wine, neither you nor your sons forever. You shall not build a house; you shall not sow seed; you shall not plant nor have a vineyard; but you shall live in tents all of your days, that you may live many days in the land when you sojourned.” We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine, all of our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, our daughters, and not to build houses to dwell in. We have no vineyard or field or seed but we have lived in tents and have obeyed and done all that Jonadab our father commanded us. But when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against the land, we said, “Come and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Syrians. So we are living in Jerusalem.”

So what in the world is going on here, or the larger question here that you may be asking, so what? The Rechabites were a nomadic clan that lived in Judah and they were faithful to one of the vows that their forefather, Jonadab, had taken back during the days of Jehu 200 years ago. Their forefather, Jonadab, came along during the time when Israel in the Northern Kingdom had been unfaithful to the Lord. They had been worshipping Baal that Ahab and Jezebel had promoted. Then King Jehu came along in order to purge Israel of this apostasy.

Jonadab, who was the ancestor of the Rechabites was a friend and supporter of Jehu’s reforms and as Jonadab saw the corruption and how in many ways Canaanite influence had drawn the people of Israel away from the Lord, he took a vow that he hoped in some way, would preserve his family and keep them faithful to the Lord. His vow involved three specific things. They would not plant crops, they would not live in houses, instead they would live in tents, and they would not drink wine. The purpose of all of this was in some way to keep his family isolated from the corruption of Israelite society and from the Canaanite influence that had come about as a result of Ahab and Jezebel promoting the worship of Baal. All of this happens during the time of Jehu’s reforms. You can
read about this in 2 Kings chapter 10 verses 15-17. This ancestor of the Rechabites is mentioned in that specific passage. 

Now was there anything ungodly about living in houses, planting crops, and drinking wine? Actually, they were things God had promised to Israel as blessings for living in the promised land. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 10 and 11, “I’m going to give you houses that you didn’t build, I’m going to give you vineyards that you didn’t plant, and I’m going to bless you with the abundance of all the crops that are going to be in the land.” So in a sense Jonadab was taking a vow that really deprived his family of specific covenantal promises that God had given to the people of Israel as a whole but again this was a voluntary vow to God that I think in some sense, again, was an attempt to keep his family loyal to the Lord.

Now some people have suggested that the Rechabites by the time that we get to Jeremiah’s day, 200 years later, that this may simply be one family or it may actually be a guild of people that have bonded together. They may be metal workers, the word “Rechabites,” is similar to the word for “chariot.” Some people have suggested that they were builders of chariots. So maybe it’s a guild but in some way, because of this vow, they have kept themselves separate from society. Now again there is nothing commanded by God that specially says you’re not supposed to do these three things. In fact, this was a blessing God had given and they had voluntarily denied themselves these things and they had become an isolated, identifiable group as a result of this.

Rechabites and Nazirite Parallel

Looking at an ancient parallel, we may compare them to the Nazirites. Remember a Nazirite vow? Numbers chapter 6 verses 2-4 involved three things: When the person took the vow they did not cut their hair, they did not drink anything alcoholic or in fact eat any sort of grape product, and they did not come in contact with a dead body. Now, being a Nazirite normally, except in extreme examples like Samson, that was simply something that you did for a short period
of time to express your devotion to God. Maybe it was taken to pray to God over something that was urgent. But the Rechabites had also taken a voluntary vow, and it was something that had not just been Jonadab, but they and actually continued this for 200 years. So here’s this family, here’s this clan, or maybe a group or a guild that has bonded together. Looking at a contemporary example, we may compare them to the Amish in America. They are like the Israelite Amish; they are an identifiable group that in some sense has separated themselves from society by these 3 specific things.

But it tells us that as they’re living in Jerusalem in the last days, because the pressure from the Babylonian army has forced them to come into the city walls. Jeremiah brings them to the temple and he not only brings them into the temple, he puts jars and flasks of wine in front of them, he tells them to drink. Maybe we could portray this and imagine this as another one of Jeremiah’s sign acts, but it seems kind of ironic here. This family has been faithful to their vow for 200 years and Jeremiah is telling them to break it in the temple!

So in chapters 26 and 36, Jeremiah has preached some important messages to the people of God at the temple and the people didn’t listen. So now Jeremiah brings the Rechabites to the temple, tells them to drink wine, revoke your family custom that has been going on for 200 years, one may wonder what’s Jeremiah doing here?

Amos chapter 2, verse 12 says that one of the sins of the Israelites is that they made the Nazirites drink wine. They encouraged these people who were expressing their devotion to God to do something that broke their vow. In a sense it looks like Jeremiah’s doing the same! Drink wine. But the amazing thing that happens, as Jeremiah tells the Rechabites to do this, they refuse to do what the prophet has told them! Now this sounds a lot like the people of Judah. The king of Judah and the people of Judah have refused to listen to the word of the Lord at the temple, but the irony is God blesses the Rechabites because they don’t do what the prophet tells them.
Rechabite Object Lesson

Now the point of this is that there is a very powerful object lesson in all of this. Jeremiah and the Lord want the people to understand something. If the Rechabites have been this loyal and faithful to a family tradition that was not directly commanded by God, then why have the people of Judah not listened to the words of the Lord that were commanded to them by God himself? The Rechabites have been faithful to human tradition, and in a sense that’s commendable. I believe that it’s played a real role in helping them in some way be faithful to God. It’s commendable, but it’s the instruction of their father, it’s the tradition of a man. What Judah has not listened to is the word of the Lord. So even though these people actually disobeyed the prophet and don’t do what the prophet tells them. The Lord ends up blessing them and rewarding them for their faithfulness to their father’s traditions.

So here’s the message that emerges out of the story of the Rechabites, here’s what the prophet, here’s what the Lord, wants to say to the people: the Lord instructs Jeremiah to go to the people of Judah and says this, verse 14, “The command that Jonadab the son of Rechab gave to his sons, to drink no wine, has been kept, and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed. [They have listened; shama’], to their fathers command.” The irony is, the people of Israel have not listened to the Lord, they have listened to their father’s command, “I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me. I have sent to you all of my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, “Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land that I gave you to your fathers.’ But you did not incline your ear to listen to me.” Remember the Rechabites have been faithful to their father’s vow for two hundred years but the Lord has been dealing with Israel and Judah for hundreds of years, and they have persistently disobeyed God. They have persistently not listened to the prophets. Therefore, “Behold, I am ringing upon Judah and all of the inhabitants of
Jerusalem all of the disaster that I have pronounced against them.” So there is the context here. The people have not listened to God, and as a result of that there is going to be a national judgment that is going to fall upon all of the people that are still remaining in the land. The Lord is going to bring these various waves of exiles, and God is going to judge the nation. Why? Because they did not listen to God. But the Lord is going to bless the Rechabites because they did listen to their father.

Jer 26-35 Panel Development

So as we look at the panel of Jeremiah 26-35 there is the possibility at the beginning in chapter 26, of all of the nation being spared from judgment. However, at the end of the panel at chapter 35, “You have no listened, you have not obeyed, you have responded to Jerimiah in exactly the same way you responded to the other prophets. Therefore I am bringing disaster on these people.” Listen to the promise that is given to the Rechabites: “But to the house of the Rechabites Jeremiah said, ‘Thus said the Lord of hosts because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father and kept all of his precepts and done all that he commanded you, therefore thus say the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me.’” Now that is not a promise that they are going to endure forever but it is a promise that as long as this clan is in existence they will have someone to represent them in front of God.

So there is death for the nation as a whole and there is life for this tiny group. There is the possibility at the beginning of Jerimiah’s ministry that this entire people, that the nation as a whole can experience life if they will just turn to God and respond to him and obey him. At the end of the cycle there is disappointment here because the only group that is going to be spared from this judgment is the Rechabites.

Rechabite Ironies

Now I think, there are some very affective rhetorical devices that are going
on here. There are some reasons why the use of the *Rechabites* here is an especially effective way of conveying the message that the Lord wants to give people as a whole. First of all, the mere fact that the Lord has to use this obscure tribe, the *Rechabites* who really are not even citizens or residents of Jerusalem to begin with, the fact that he has to use them as his example of obedience. Jeremiah has had to look long and hard to find someone that has been faithful.

The second thing that is ironic, and again we’ve already mentioned this. The *Rechabites* exposed a lifestyle that did not fully allow them to enjoy all the blessings of the covenant: the houses, the vineyards, the crops, the products that the Lord would give them. In fact, they probably by working their craft had to trade that for food because they didn’t raise crops themselves. They did not get to enjoy the vineyards, the wine, the houses, and all of the things that the Lord had prepared for these people. Yet they are the ones that are spared and are going to experience blessing. But it is a very limited kind of blessing because they live a life that again, doesn’t allow them to fully enjoy the land flowing with milk and honey.

The third irony here is that this passage never really tells us anything directly about the piety of the *Rechabites*, or their devotion or commitment to God. We assume that the purpose behind this the reason for this vow initially Jonadab may have thought my people are not going to grow crops, live in houses and drink wine. It was a way of keeping them separate from the corruption of the society around them. We assume that the *Rechabites* have continued this as part of their devotion to God but there is nothing specifically stated about their love for the Lord or their devotion to God. They even disobey the commandment that the prophet gives them at the beginning, “drink wine” so it’s almost as if they are unresponsive to the prophet but yet the Lord rewards them.

Again the final irony of all of this is that the Lord rewards them for their obedience to the traditions of their fathers. The contrast is, if God would bless these people who have kept this voluntary vow, then why has Israel and why has...
Judah, why have they not listened to the word of God? The word of God and our response to that is a matter of life and death. The Rechabites will experience life, the nation as a whole will experience death and this blessing again comes from listening to the teaching and paying attention to the tradition of their fathers. So there are some interesting things going on here. Here is our example of the remnant. What does the remnant look like? It’s the Rechabites, it’s the Amish of Judah that is going to be preserved.

Now the promise that is given to the Rechabites that they will not lack a man to stand before me, is the same promise that is given to the Levites and the house of David in Jeremiah 33. Now when that promise is given to the Levites and to David in Jeremiah 33 it has great national significance. It means that the role of the Davidic king, even though God is judging them in the present, that role, and that special relationship God had with David is going to be continued. That special covenant promise that God made to David that he would establish his throne forever is going to continue. That’s central to the life of Israel as a nation and it’s going to be central to its restoration. When the Lord says, “The Levites will never lack a man to stand before me” that’s important, because for the nation, the role of the Levites were to be the priests and the people that served at the temple, that mediated God’s blessings. But when we come to chapter 35 and it says: “The Rechabites will never lack a man to stand before me” that has great significance for the tribe, but doesn’t mean much for the nation.

Jeremiah 34: Reversal and Enslavement of the Israelites?

So, all of this portrayal of the Rechabites as being the ones who are the faithful examples, who are the ones and the only ones in this section to experience the blessing of life; this is an incredible condemnation on the nation of Judah as a whole. What is laid beside the example of the faithfulness of the Rechabites is the national disobedience of Judah. When we go back to chapter 34, and a specific act of disobedience that is going to happen at the end of Judah’s history, and again the timeframe of Zedekiah and the timeframe of Jehoiakim are often laid side by side.
Here’s the event in chapter 34, Zedekiah brings the national judgment that is decreed in chapter 35 that brings first panel to and end and says the people had a chance to experience life. But they’re not going to receive it because they did not respond to God in the right way.

We go back to chapter 34 and now we’re in the last days Judah. It’s the time of Zedekiah, the Babylonian invasion and the army is pressing on Judah and in a serve way. Verse 7 of chapter 34 says, “Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke all of these words to Zedekiah to Judah, in Jerusalem, when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all of the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah, for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that were remained. So we see a place in chapter 34 7 where there are only three fortified cities of Judah left: Lachish, Azekah, and Jerusalem. When we read the Lachish letters that are extra biblical sources they talk about the same time. They mention that the signal fires that Azekah have gone out. So it’s going to get worse. The reason that things are going to get worse is directly tied in verses 8 to 22 in Jeremiah 34 to a direct act of disobedience against God and God’s law that happens during the time of Zedekiah.

Let me read a few verses here and then we’ll set the context and the setting of what’s going on. In verse 8 right after verse 7 there are only three fortified cites still standing, “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after king Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves male and female so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother. And they obeyed, [they shama’ed] rare example here of the people of Judah here actually doing something that obeyed God. Here’s what’s going on. The Old Testament law had instructed the people of Israel that they were not to permanently enslave their fellow Israelites. If an Israelite was required to become a slave because of a debt he owed to another person he was only required to serve for 6 years. But in the seventh year Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 15 that person was to be given the
opportunity to go free. When you release them as a slave you are actually to give them provisions so that they could set themselves up for their new life. There was never to be a permanent enslavement of any other Israelite. God had laid that out very clearly in his law.

What this passage reflects is that there had been a long time when Judah had not observed this law. Now some scholars have argued that what does Zedekiah did here is not directly tied into these commandments because there is general amnesty given to all the servants and Zedekiah simply saying, “Look, we’re going to make a covenant and we’re going to release all of our servants.” I think it simply reflects the fact that it has been so long since they have obeyed God’s command that they have to proclaim this general amnesty I still see a connection to Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 15. So this is a positive thing. They listened and they obeyed and they’re doing what God’s law commanded them to do. They are releasing their slaves what they’re really trying to do though is that as the Babylonian army is pressing on them, maybe they can find some way to get God’s favor, and maybe they should have paid attention to God’s word. “If we do this kind act to our slaves and if we give this general amnesty then maybe there’s the possibility that God is going to take his judgment away from us.”

But Jeremiah 34:11 is going to say this but afterward, and maybe for some reason the Babylonian army withdraws we read about that happening in some other passages, things aren’t as tight as they once were. The Babylonian army is not pressing on them as much as they were previously when they issued the decree when they made the covenant and they released their slaves but afterward they turned around. There’s our word shuv. “They took back,” there’s the causative form of our verb shuv. “They took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them back into subjection as slaves.” So we begin this episode with something that looks very positive: they obeyed one of the specifics precepts of the law of God by releasing their slaves they listen they shama-ed they obeyed, they repented, they shuv-ed they turned their direction. But what this passages is
saying is they’re going to put themselves back under judgment because what happened is they repented of their repentance. Throughout the book of Jeremiah they have been a turning-away people who need to turn back. Now, finally, they do turn, they do what God commands them and then they shuv and they turn away from what God has said once again. And as a result of that, they bring themselves back under a sentence of judgment. The Lord says this: “You recently repented.”

We finally had an example where you finally you shuv-ed you did what God commanded you to do. “You repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name.” So they did two things: they turned around and they made a covenant. Now the problem throughout Jeremiah’s ministry that he’d been charging the people that he’d broken the covenant. They made a covenant to do what is right in God’s eyes.

But again verse 16 they repented of their repentance. You turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and his female slaves, whom you had set free.”

So at the end of the first panel what we have is, an example of national disobedience in the city of Jerusalem where Zedekiah and the people blatantly tried to manipulate God by keeping his precept for a little while when they’d originally released their slaves. Then when things get easy again, or when the pressure of the Babylonian army relieved a little bit but when they take their slaves back as a result of that, there is national judgment.

As a result the possible relenting of judgment that set was forth in chapter 26 is not going to happen and that national judgment is set in contrast to the faithfulness of the Rechabites. Who know it’s not even their command it’s not even their obedience of God, it’s commandments of their father. They will be spared from judgment. There is national judgment there is a tiny remnant that experiences light. Response to the word of God is a matter of life and death we’re reminded of that again and again. We see that in the contrast of Jerusalem and the
Rechabites. Listen to the decree of judgment that God is going to pass, listen to the sentence that he executes on them because of their unfaithfulness in this particular covenantal thing that’s going on in 34 verse 17 Loken, “therefore thus says the Lord, you have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty everyone to his brother and to his neighbor.” They have taken away the liberty of these people that were released. So the Lord says, “Behold, I proclaimed to you liberty. We got a repetition here a word play going on. You took away the liberty of these Hebrew servants I’m going to give you liberty and here’s what this liberty’s going to involve. I’m going to give you liberty to die by the sword, by pestilence, by famine declares the Lord and I will make you a whore to the kings of all the earth. Throughout the prophets there’s going to be this emphasis on that idea that the punishment fits the crime. You took away their liberty, I’m going to give you liberty and it’s going to liberty to die in some pretty horrible ways.

The other aspect of this where the punishment fits the crime is that as they made this covenant they followed the rights and the rituals that were often assisted with the ancient Near East which involved the cutting up of animal. It seems like the purpose why they did this, they would cut the animals up, they would lay them out, this was part of the sacrifices and things they did as they were making these covenants. The covenant partners would walk between the animal parts and what this solemn ceremony is signifying is that the covenant partners were binding themselves to this agreement and saying to each other, if we don’t keep the terms of this agreement then may the same thing happen to us that have happened to these animals that we have offered as part of this ritual.

We see this happening in the covenant between God and Abraham back in Genesis 15 Abraham falls asleep as God passes through the animal parts and God obligates himself to keep the covenant. They had obligated themselves to do what God had said. First of all, their fore fathers had obligated to that when they had received the Mosaic Law at the beginning. They have recommitted themselves; they have made a covenant. So what God says is, because you have not kept that
covenant, the punishment is going to fit the crime. He says this in verse 18: “And the men who transgress my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and pass between the parts.” There is going to be a national judgment because of the disobedience of the nation as a whole. And so, at the end of the panel, what we have at the end of the first panel is the national judgment of the people who did not keep their covenant. They repented of their repentance, and we have the promise of life to the Rechabites.

End of Second Panel (Jer 45)

Now, as we go to the end of the second panel, we’re going to see something very similar. We go to chapter 45. Here is the promise of life that’s given at the end of the second panel. In chapter 36, again, at the beginning of this, it’s the same situation. If the people will obey, if they will listen, if they will turn from their sinful ways, God will relent and give them life. Are they going to do that? And, in chapter 37, Zedekiah, his attendants, the people, they did not obey the word of the Lord. That’s why Jerusalem fell and this whole panel’s going to document more disobedience. But, the promise of life that is offered in 36, and is given to one individual in chapter 45. Again, note the size of the remnant. In the first panel, it’s a small remnant, it’s a small clan, it’s an obscure group and you get the idea that Jeremiah had to look long and hard to find someone. At the end of the second panel, the remnant consists of one individual. The Lord gives this promise to Baruch, and remember Baruch is Jeremiah’s faithful scribe. Baruch is the man who had the courage to go to the temple and read the words that Jeremiah had dictated to him. That was a courageous act. Because of his faithfulness, because of his obedience, because of the fact that he remains with Jeremiah, through thick and thin, the Lord’s going to give him this promise. “Thus says the Lord God of Israel,” chapter 45:2, “O Baruch: You said, ‘Woe is me! For the Lord has added sorrow to my pain.’ ” And so, Jeremiah was a weeping prophet, Baruch was a weeping scribe. I mean, both went through the similar things. “‘I am weary with
my groaning, and I find no rest.’ Thus, shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up.”’ That is the whole land. There are those key verbs that are introduced to us back in chapter 1 to talk about Jeremiah’s ministry of judgment. The Lord’s bringing this about. But here’s the promise to Baruch: “As for you, do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the Lord. But I will give your life as a prize of war in all of the places to which you may go.” So, Baruch, even if you go to the temple, and the king hates you, and does not want to hear your message, I’m going to protect you and preserve you. Baruch, when Johanan and the military officials take you and Jeremiah and lead you away into Egypt, and you have to go into this foreign land, I’m going to be with you. Baruch, whenever all these experiences are happening to you and Jeremiah, whatever happens, I’m not promising you that you will not have to go through difficulty; do not seek great things for yourself. That term is used in Jeremiah 33 to talk about the ultimate restoration land. Baruch’s not going to get to live to see those kinds of blessings, but God will reward him with his life because of his faithfulness to God.

Notice what he says: “I will give you your life as a prize of war in all of the places to which you may go.” I like the way that William Holladay has explained that little expression. He says that it’s an old soldier’s joke, that we went into battle and what plunder did we get? Well, the only plunder that we got is that we escaped with our very lives, and that’s all that God is promising to Baruch. He will escape with his very life. But Baruch experiences the blessing of life that is offered to the people at the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry, but was rejected by them. Listening to the word of God is a matter of life and death. Baruch will experience God’s blessing because of the fact that he has been obedient to God.

That act of faithfulness and obedience is directly contrasted to the disobedience of the Jewish refugees that are in Egypt in Jeremiah chapter 44.
Remember, the prophet we’ve looked at this passage before, the prophet comes and confronts them about their idolatrous ways. They need to put those practices behind them, they need to be faithful to the Lord. Being in this foreign environment, it seems, has added to their willingness to follow these other gods. They say to Jeremiah: “As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you. We will do everything we have vowed. We will make offerings to the Queen of Heaven, pour out our drink offerings to her. We will not listen to you.”

This kind of brings us to the end of everything that we’ve observed in 26-45. There’s constantly the charge. The people did not listen to God: they did not pay attention to his word. Well, at the very end of this, they blatantly say we will not listen to what the Lord says.

It’s also interesting to contrast chapter 44, at the end of the second panel, and this national disobedience with the refugees in Egypt with the disobedience of the people in Judah in chapter 34. Because what you have in chapter 34 is that the people reneg on a vow to do what is right. What you have going on here, is that the people persist and express their willingness and their commitment to fulfill a vow that involves doing something that is wrong. We’re going to keep offering our sacrifices, we’re going to keep making our offerings to these pagan deities because we believe that they can bless us in ways that the Lord did not. In fact, the disaster that has come upon us as a nation came about as a result of Josiah’s reforms where he took those things away from us.

Here’s God’s response to the words that they have said and we come to the end of this: The Life of Baruch, the Judgment of the People. The Lord says this: “‘I have sworn by my great name,’ says the Lord, that my name shall no more be invoked by the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying ‘As the Lord God lives.’ Behold, I am watching over them for disaster and not good.” They did not turn away from their? So the Lord’s going to bring disaster on them. All of the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the
sword and by famine, until there is an end of them. And those who escape the sword shall return from the land of Egypt to the land of Judah, few in number, and all of the remnant of Judah, who came to the land of Egypt to live, shall know whose word shall stand, mine or theirs.”

So there is going to be a judgment of those people in Egypt. There’s going to be a judgment of the remnant there and they are going to be practically wiped out. Only a tiny minority of them will come back to the land. So again, at the end of the second panel exactly the same thing that we’ve seen in the first: there is a people-wide judgment followed by the salvation of a tiny remnant. Jeremiah had also told the people that the hope for Israel’s future lay.
Our focus in this session is going to be on Jeremiah chapters 27 to 29. We are specifically dealing with the topic of prophetic conflict. We raised this issue in our study of Jeremiah 23: the qualities, the characteristics of a true prophet that are laid out in Deuteronomy 18, the struggle that Jeremiah in his ministry had with the false prophets who were promising the people peace and who were giving the people a reason to ignore his message and his warnings of judgment. That issue of prophetic conflict is going to come to the fore in chapters 27 and 29 as well.

Let me also connect these passages to the structure that we’ve been working through. We’ve talked about chapters 26 to 45 as a story of the rejection of the word of the Lord. The theological purpose behind this was to demonstrate that it was the rejection of God’s word that ultimately led to the judgment of exile. It was not God failing to fulfill his covenant obligations. It was Israel failing to fulfill their obligations to the Lord. We’ve also seen, or tried to look at, the Jehoiakim framework around this passage, chapters 26 to 35 and chapters 36 to 45. We have these four events and episodes from the time of Jehoiakim’s ministry that provide a grid that we read this story through. The time of Jehoiakim was a decisive moment when Judah turned away from the Lord and when the rebellion and the kings rejection of the word of God ultimately brought Judah’s judgment and sealed their fate.

In our last session we talked about the fact that there was an offer of life given to the people, but the promise of life at the end of each panel is only given to a very tiny remnant. In panel one, in chapter 35, we have the promise to the Rechabites. This obscure tribe that have remained faithful to their family traditions and as a result of that, the Lord says, “The Rechabites will never fail to have a man to stand before me.” In the second panel, we have Baruch, who has been
Jeremiah’s faithful scribe. Jeremiah was a weeping prophet. Baruch was a weeping scribe because he went through the same experiences that Jeremiah did. Because of his faithfulness, he is promised life in the context of national judgment. But at the end of both of those sections where you have the deliverance of the Rechabites and life for Baruch, you also have judgment on the nation as a whole.

In chapter 34, there is going to be judgment on the people of Judah and on the king because they have turned back from their covenant to release their slaves the way that the Mosaic Law prescribed. In chapter 44, there is going to be judgment on the remnant in Egypt because they have continued in their idolatrous ways. So we’ve looked at the outer part of the structure and the frame itself. Now we’re going to turn and look inside the structure to see a little bit more of what’s there.

I want to make one word, or one comment, about the structure. I understand that I am presenting a certain structure of the book of Jeremiah. There are other scholars who are going to present structures that may be equally valid but that differ in some ways. For example, I’ve seen a number of studies that will look at this section and they will divide this structure this way: chapters 26 to 36: The stories of Jehoiakim’s rejection of the word of the LORD provide an inclusio. So they will see the second section going from perhaps chapters 26 to 36. Then in chapter 37 and following, we have the roughly chronological story of what happens in the last days of Judah as a nation. So there are sometimes more than one way to explain a structure and I don’t want to say about the structure that I’m presenting here: “This is the definitive way to read the book.” It is one way to read the book that I think helps us to make sense of some important things and does reflect some of the architecture and design of the book. But it’s often difficult to say, “Clearly this is what was in the mind of the writer.” We are simply trying to provide a structure that I think provides coherence for all of this. Sometimes the structures, I think, work more effectively when we keep them at a general level. When we know general parallels, there are times where we can develop structures,
that are so complex that you almost think that Jeremiah and Baruch would have had to have a computer to do this kind of work. Or the book of Isaiah is laid out in such chiastic structures that it would have been very difficult for the prophet to have done this. So I see a structure here that I think shows some general pattern, general design, and that helps us to make sense of the message where we divide the sections into 26 to 35 and 36 to 45 as two panels.

Now within the panel, within the structure, in the middle of this, there is a choice that is facing Judah as a people and a nation that is very different than what is offered to them in Jehoiakim’s day in chapters 26 to 35. Inside the structure, we’re dealing more with the time of Zedekiah. The framework around this deals with the time of Jehoiakim--609 to 597 BC. Within the structure, we are dealing primarily with the time of Zedekiah, who reigned from 597 to 586 BC. We’re looking at the last days of Judah as a nation, and so the hope and the possibility that’s given to Jehoiakim in the opening chapters is, “Perhaps you and the people will respond and you can be spared from judgment.” There’s the real opportunity where there’s a choice between listening to God and avoiding judgment or not listening to God and experiencing the destruction and devastation that God is going to bring upon them.

What’s going on within the structure, however, and within the framework is that the choice facing Judah now has changed in a significant way. Now the two options that Zedekiah and the people have are to submit to Babylon, surrender to them, and be spared from judgment. Look, God is sending the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment. If you will surrender to them and accept this and submit to them and turn back to God, then God will spare you. If you continue your resistance, if you persist in your sin, if you believe that you can militarily figure out a way to avoid God’s judgment, it’s ultimately going to lead to total destruction. So the choice for Jehoiakim is: choose God’s way and be spared from judgment. The choice facing Zedekiah and the people is: choose God’s way or be absolutely destroyed.
In chapter 27 to 29, we get a reflection of the prophetic conflict that is going on during Zedekiah’s reign dealing with this issue, “What do we do with the Babylonians?” or, “What would God want us to think?” or, “What perspective should we have on the Babylonian crisis?” Remember, Jeremiah’s perspective is that Judah has violated the covenant, they have not been faithful to the LORD. One of the covenant curses that God had warned he would bring against his people was the covenant curse of military invasion and exile. Jeremiah is warning the people that God is using the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment. This is all falling out in accordance with the covenant laid out in the days of Moses. If they do not repent and turn from their sinful ways, then God is going to use the Babylonians to bring destruction on them. However they see this, or however they respond to this, if they do not submit to Babylon, they are going to be absolutely destroyed. There is no way for them at this point to avoid subjugation to Babylon. God has given the Babylonians dominion over the nations and that dominion includes the nation of Judah.

The prophets that opposed Jeremiah have a fundamentally different understanding of the covenant. They believe that God has chosen Israel as his special people, that God is obligated because of that to bless them, and that God is going to protect them no matter what. Jeremiah is warning, “The Babylonian army is coming and these waves of exile that you are experiencing are increasingly going to get worse and worse.”

Jeremiah is going to tell them that the exile is going to last for seventy years. The people that are taken away into exile need to settle down there, build houses, marry, raise families, submit to the king of Babylon and pray for the peace of Babylon because they’re going to be there for a while. The false prophets, based on their defective view of covenant, believe that God is going to rescue them and within a couple of years this crisis will soon be over. So we have the debate and the discussion in chapters 27 to 29: What do we do about the Babylonian crisis? Jeremiah is saying submit to Babylon; the prophets are saying something else.
Now, this is paralleled in the second panel in chapters 37 to 39 because, again, we’re in the days of Zedekiah; it’s the last days before the fall of Jerusalem. But, now, it’s more the political and the military officials debating: what do we do about Babylon?

In the second panel, Jeremiah’s going to say the same thing: submit to Babylon, and be spared. We have the officials and the military leaders who have listened to the defective promises of the prophets, and they’re continuing the resistance. So the parallel in the two panels is: What do we do? What about the issue of submission to Babylon that’s going to be a major focus in 27 to 29, 37 to 39? We also have a cause-and-effect relationship here because in 27 to 29, we have two prophetic messages. Do we believe Jeremiah, and do we submit to Babylon? Do we change our ways, or, do we believe in the false promises of the prophets of peace and continue the resistance? The consequence of that is that Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, and we get a record of that in chapters 37 to 39. So, in a sense, there’s also a warning and fulfillment parallelism between 27 to 29 and 37 to 39. But as we go back now and look specifically at chapters 27 to 29, I’d like for us to notice three specific instances of prophetic conflict that Jeremiah is going to endure and go through because of this message of “submit to Babylon.” Remember, the people are the ones that are in the middle here. The officials and the kings are also involved. How do we respond; who do we believe? This is a serious thing. The life of the nation of Judah and their fate is ultimately going to be determined by how they respond to this message.

We’re reminded, just at a practical level of the importance of theology. What we believe about God, and the ideas that we have about God, ultimately determine the most important decisions and actions that we make in life. The theology of the prophets of peace and the theology of the prophet Jeremiah give us two very different understandings of reality. How people act on the basis of those theologies is ultimately going to determine the fate of Judah. So today, when people say, “You know, we need to give up our debates about theology; it’s not
important anyway. Let’s just focus on living out what it means to be a Christian.” I think they are undermining the importance of something that’s very real: the way that our theology ultimately determines our behavior.

So, here’s the debate about that theology that’s going on in chapters 27 and 29. It tells us in chapter 27, verse 1, it says, “In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.” So, remember Zedekiah comes to the throne in 609 BC, but it also tells us in chapter 28 that the story that happens there is in the same year as the event in 27. It says there in that same year at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the king of Judah in the 5th month of the 4th year. So the fourth year of Zedekiah’s reign is 593 BC. So, that’s the time that’s the chronological context for what we’re going to see taking place in chapters 27 and 28.

Jeremiah 27 and the Prophetic Conflict

Now, there’s something else about the opening verse of chapter 27, verse 1 that I wanted to call attention to. In the ESV and in most English Bibles it’s going to say, “In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.” That’s the title that’s provided for this section. The Hebrew version is going to say, “In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim.” So, what we’ve talked about the Jehoiakim frame and the fact that there are only passages about Jehoiakim in 26, 35, 40, 36, and 45 actually, in the Hebrew text, we have a reference to Jehoiakim in 27:1. In the Greek text, we do not have a heading at all. But, as we look at the events that take place in this story, it’s clearly something that’s dated to the time of the reign of Zedekiah. So the reference in the MT [Masoretic Text; Hebrew], the title that says, “In the reign of Jehoiakim.” It’s a title that’s been added later. I think the English versions are right in amending “Jehoiakim” to read “Zedekiah.” So, that keeps our framework intact, but the time of this is 593.

What’s going on here is that a delegation of ambassadors from various the nation states that surround Judah have come to Jerusalem for a conference with Zedekiah. What this conference is about is that these smaller nations realize that on their own and by themselves there is no way that they’re going to be able to
withstand the power of the Babylonian army. There’s no way that they’re going to be able to resist the Babylonian invasion. So what they have decided to do is to join together in an alliance. If we pull our forces together and we saw the same thing happening with Judah and the nations states during the Assyrian crisis in the previous century, if we can come up with an alliance, maybe we can stand up to the big bully on the block. So they are entertaining the possibility of a rebellion against the Babylonians. What does Jeremiah think about that? Well, Jeremiah’s message is: God has decreed that the Babylonians are going to be in control of the nations. Any type of resistance against them is futile. That’s not just the political assessment. That’s not just, well, I’m looking at the size of our armies versus the size of their armies. It’s a theological assessment based on Jeremiah’s understanding of what God had revealed to him that the Babylonians are God’s instrument of judgment. During the Assyrian crisis Isaiah had said the Assyrians are the rod of God’s anger. Jeremiah is going to say Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant and so resisting him, withstanding him, is not going to work. This conference that you’re having where you’re plotting and putting together this political solution is not going to work.

We read also in Jeremiah chapter 51, verse 59 that Zedekiah was actually required to go to Babylon in 593 BC, and he was sent back. He was allowed to remain on the throne, but you have to wonder if Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians have not heard about this conference and they want a report from Zedekiah where Zedekiah is affirming to them his continued loyalty in the fact that he’s going to pay tribute to them. The Babylonians were the ones who had set Zedekiah up as the king of Judah in 597 BC when they captured the city of Jerusalem and took away Jehoiakim. They had set up Zedekiah as their puppet. Zedekiah would be allowed to remain on the throne as long as he was loyal to the Babylonians and he paid the tribute. What happens with Zedekiah, because of his own weakness as a leader, is that Zedekiah’s going to be drawn back and forth between do we continue to resist the Babylonians, or do we submit to them?
Zedekiah is listening to his military officials who say, “you know what we’ve got a shot. If we pull together our forces, if we come up with the right strategy, if we develop the right coalition, we can withstand the Babylonians.” Jeremiah is saying, “You don’t have a shot. God has decreed the subjugation of the nations to Nebuchadnezzar, and any kind of resistance to him is futile.” Jeremiah is going to give that message both to Zedekiah and to these other delegates and in chapter 27.

First to the people he’s going to repeat this message three times: resistance to Babylon is futile. Let’s look at verse three. “Send word to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the sons of Ammon, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon by the hands of the envoys who have come to Jerusalem.” I’ve got a message for all the nations and here’s what he says in verse five the Lord says, “It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all of these into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beast of the field to serve him.” Look, the Lord says, “I’m the creator of the world. I own the earth. I’m not just the God of Israel. I’m the God of all nations and I have decreed as the sovereign Lord and the creator who determines these things that Nebuchadnezzar is to rule over the nations.” We mentioned this earlier in the course but by giving Nebuchadnezzar control, not only of the nations, but even of the animals. Nebuchadnezzar here is being portrayed in a sense as a second Adam, who was God’s vice regent, who was God’s image. Nebuchadnezzar is God’s image. To resist Nebuchadnezzar is to resist God. So, this political coalition is not going to work.

Here’s a warning to the nations, verse eight, “If any nation or any kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, with pestilence, declares the Lord, until I have consumed it by his hand.” Remember, this is the time when Jeremiah is wearing the yoke around his neck.
This wooden yoke represents the message of subjugation. He’s not just preaching this, he’s visually demonstrating it. Now, he’s going to give a specific warning to the nations and to these envoys. He says, “Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are telling you, somehow, that you can resist the hegemony of Babylon. It will not happen. And don’t listen to these false prophets.

The interesting thing is when Jeremiah gives this message to the second audience in verse 10, listen to the people that he addresses there, “To Zedekiah, the king of Judah, I spoke in like manner.” This chapter is going to level Judah off with all of the other nations. They’re no different. They may have believed, “There are special circumstances because we’re the people of God and we’re involved in this.” It is the same message that God gives to the Edomites, to the Moabites, to the Ammonites, to the people of Tyre, and Sidon, the same message that the Lord is going to give to Zedekiah. His status as the Davidic king doesn’t put him outside the dominion of Babylonians. He’s going to say to Zedekiah, “Don’t listen to the words of your prophets, submit to Babylon, that’s the only hope that you have for survival.”

In the past, God has referred to David as his servant. What happens in this passage in chapter 27, verse 6 is that Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant. The same thing is said in chapter 25. The Lord in Judah’s past history, and in the past history of Israel, has committed himself to the house of David. God had a special relationship with the Davidic king. He adopted the Davidic king as his son and he put him on the throne. What the Lord will say about this king is: “This is my anointed one, I have chosen him, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill, and all of the nations are to submit to him. If they do not, they will answer to me.” So David and David’s sons were God’s vice regents. As the sons of God, they ruled on earth as earthy representations of God’s heavenly dominion and sovereignty. The Lord says that ultimately, “I am going to give all of the nations of the earth and I am going to place them all under the authority of David.” It is a
pretty amazing statement in light of the fact that the land of Israel was about the size of New Jersey, but ultimately these kings are going to rule over the nations.

That arrangement has changed during the days of Jeremiah because now God’s servant, now God’s vice regent, is Nebuchadnezzar. So Zedekiah, don’t think that being the divinely appointed king and having a special relationship with God is going to exempt you from this. You are to submit to Babylon just as much as all of these other nations. Here’s the warning, verse 14, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, ‘You shall not serve the king of Babylon.’” “For it is a lie, it is sheker, that they are prophesying to you. I have not sent them’, declares the Lord, ‘but they are prophesying falsely in my name with the result that I will drive you out of the land.” If you listen to this false message, if you buy into this false theology, it is going to have devastating consequences for you because the only way to survive is submission to Babylon. I think it’s very interesting the way that the prophet levels Judah off with the other nations. There are going to be other prophets that will do exactly the same thing as they’re preaching judgment on the people of Israel and Judah they’re going to level the nation of Israel and say, “You are no better than the nations themselves.”

Parallels in Amos 3

One of the prophets who does this particularly in an effective way is Amos. He does this in several ways, I’m just going to mention this real quickly and then go back to Jeremiah 27. Amos begins his oracles with a series of judgment speeches against the nations. Remember, he’s a prophet to Israel and in his seventh and final, or what appears to be the final judgment speech there’s a message against Judah, Israel’s enemy down in the south. I can imagine the people of Israel celebrating this and thinking, “Yeah! God go get ‘em! Get all the pagan people’s around us!” But the eighth oracle that Amos gives is a message against Israel itself. It’s “Wow, the hammer falls,” the fact that they are God’s chosen people does not mean that they are exempt from judgment. In Amos chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, Amos says this, ‘Hear this, word, that the Lord has spoken against
you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt. You only have I known of all the families of the earth;”

So you hear that and say, “Yeah, there it is, they are special. God brought them up out of the land of Egypt, God knows the people of Israel like he knows no other family on earth.” But listen to what Amos says, “Therefore, I will punish you for all of your iniquities.” He doesn’t say, “Therefore, you’re the chosen of all the earth. Therefore, I’m going to bless you, protect you, and watch out for you. No, because of that special relationship, you’re more responsible and I’m going to punish you as a result of that.”

Down in chapter 3 in Amos, later on in the passage in verse 9, “Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt,” all these foreign places, “and say, ‘Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria, and see the great tumult within her and all of the oppressed in her midst.’ They do not know how to do right, declares the Lord, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.”

The Lord invites representatives from all these other nations to come to Samaria, to take a seat, to look on what’s going on in the city and he says to these, “Have you ever seen anyone as wicked as the people of Samaria and Israel?” So, the Israelites and the people of Judah, they thought, “We have an exempt status from all of this because we’re the chosen people of God.” The prophets level them off and say, “You’re under the same sentence of judgment that all of these other people are.” That’s what God is saying to Zedekiah here as well.

Third Repetition: Jer 27:16

Now, the third time this message is repeated, chapter 27 verse 16, again, three times the prophet is going to say it. This is pretty important. But listen to who the message is directed to this time. “Then I spoke to the priests and to all of the people.” Now the message is not just to the king, it’s to the people, it’s to the religious leaders who are going to be affected by this. It says, verse 16, “Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you saying, ‘Behold,
the vessels of the Lord’s house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon,’ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you.”

So three times in chapter 27 Jeremiah is going to make this statement, “Submit to the Babylonians, it’s futile, it’s useless to withstand them, or try to battle your way out of this.” Three times, who are the ones that are responsible for this false belief? It is the prophets. It is the prophets who are prophesying sheker, who are making promises to the people and the Lord has not sent them. So again we’re back to this issue of prophetic conflict. You can imagine the, the driving topic on talk radio in Jerusalem in the last days is: “What do we do about the Babylonian crisis?” We can imagine Jeremiah being invited in for the interview as someone on the other side. You can pretty clearly see their positions, but that’s the struggle going on in chapter 27 to 29.

Jeremiah Versus Hananiah (Jer 28)

We come to the second example of this in chapter 28. I think as we’ve already talked at an earlier time. It is one of the most interesting examples of Jeremiah in conflict with a false prophet. But what’s going on here is that we not only see two different messages, but in a sense, I think we’re drawn into the struggle that the people had in trying to determine, which one of these guys is telling us the truth. There is Jeremiah who is prophesying, “Resistance is futile.” He’s the one who’s wearing the yoke. On the other hand, there is Hananiah who speaks in the name of the Lord and who is referred to in the text as a prophet but who is giving a completely opposite message. If you are one of the people, you want to listen to the message of Hananiah because it is so much more positive—“In a short while all of this is going to be over.” Jeremiah is saying the exile is going to last 70 years, so if you continue the resistance you are going to be destroyed. They are already inclined to want to listen to Hananiah. So we have the struggle over discerning a true prophet from a false one.

In the Greek translation of Jeremiah in this chapter we note something interesting—Hananiah is referred to as a false prophet, a pseudo-prophet. But in the
Marsoretic text, here in the Hebrew, both Jeremiah and Hananiah are referred to by the same term. They are both called “prophets.” Actually the term prophet is added a number of times in the New Testament to emphasize this idea. We have two people here that are speaking that both claim to be prophets. I think it’s even interesting that we even have certain verses where it’s going to refer to both of them as a prophet.” For example, in verse 5, “Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah the prophet.” This gets confusing! In verse 15, “And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah...” So you’ve got this word “prophet” all over the place and it’s referring to both of these guys.

Let’s remember the message of Hananiah. Jeremiah is proclaiming “Submit to Babylon,” he’s wearing the wooden yoke. “You cannot resist, God has decreed the sovereignty of the Babylonians over the nations.” Hananiah is very aggressive. It takes a lot of chutzpah to do this, but he interrupts Jeremiah’s message, takes the yoke off of Jeremiah’s neck and smashes it to the ground. He says, “Listen, Jeremiah has got it all wrong, instead of this being a long-term problem, within two years we will be delivered and everything about this Babylonian crisis will be over.” As Hananiah is trying to convince the people of his message, in some ways he gives a more convincing performance than Jeremiah does.

I think there’s this narrative going on here that I refer to as “prophetic mirroring.” Jeremiah is called a prophet; Hananiah is called a prophet. Jeremiah says “Thus says the Lord;” Hananiah says, “Thus says the Lord.” Hananiah doesn’t step up and say, “I’m a false prophet, I’m speaking to you in the name of Baal.” He says, “Thus says the Lord.” There may be even the possibility that at times in his life Hananiah has been a true prophet of God and God has communicated valid messages through him. Jeremiah performs a sign act; he wears the wooden yoke. Hananiah performs a sign act; he breaks the yoke and gives a message in connection with that. So it’s difficult.
Hananiah and the Zion Traditions

Something that adds a little bit to the tension to all of this is that Hananiah may have credibility and credentials as a prophet himself. But Hananiah also has a past theological tradition to base his message on. We looked, when we talked about Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon, at the Zion psalms. Psalm 46: “The Lord is a very present help in a time of trouble.” We know that Zion will not be moved, it will not be shaken, and even if there’s a storm that shatters the whole world, Jerusalem is a storm shelter. In the presence of God, even as these waters are roaring and foaming and raging, the presence of God is like a peaceful river that flows through the city. It’s like the spring of Gihon that brings God’s blessing to the people. We will not fall because God is with us. Zion is secure even if it’s attacked by an enemy army; even if these nations rage and roar and foam, God will deliver us. God’s going to protect. God has obligated himself to watch over the city of Jerusalem.

Hananiah also had the preaching of Isaiah, who in many ways appealed to the Zion traditions. Listen to what it says in Isaiah 17:12 which uses the same imagery that is in Psalm 46 is in this passage. Isaiah says, “Ah, the thunder of many peoples; they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roaring of the nations;” [The raging of the nations is just like in Psalm 46]. “They roar like the roaring of mighty waters! The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning, they are no more!” So things might be bad at night but before the morning ever arrives these nations that are raging and roaring against Jerusalem, “God’s going to deliver us!” There’s this past theological tradition that Hananiah could have very easily appealed to here. He also could have appealed to the story of how God had delivered the city of Jerusalem from the Assyrians in 701 BC.
The Lord had done that in a really dramatic way. We’ve talked about this a number of times. The Assyrian army was 180,000 strong. They surround the city, Hezekiah trusts God, the angel of the Lord goes out in the middle of the night and defeats them. So there are all these things where Hananiah could have said, “Listen, there are other prophets that have said to you the same things that I am saying to you. Why should you listen to this guy Jeremiah who’s talking all of this doom and gloom?”

Something else more specific about Hananiah’s message, in 28:3, in the Hebrew text when he says “Within two years I will bring back to this place,” what the text actually says is “Within two days” [Within 2 yom]. Now we know the word yom doesn’t always necessarily mean a 24-hour day and there’s a huge debate about that in the days of creation–in Genesis 1–that I, thankfully, I don’t have to address here. Yom can be a general term for a period of time–the day of the Lord. But it’s interesting to note that he doesn’t simply say within two years. He actually says, “Within two days I will bring back the place.” Now I don’t think he literally means forty-eight hours here, but it’s an idiomatic way of saying, “Look, in a very short time the Lord is going to restore his people.”

Jeremiah 28:11, Hananiah, after he has broken the yoke, says to them, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon from the neck of the nations within two days.’” So it’s one thing to prophesy two years, but to use this idiom “two days,” the deliverance is coming really soon.

Hananiah and Hosea

Again, I got to thinking about this in light of the past theological tradition of the prophets, Hananiah had a proof text–Hananiah had a passage that he could have gone to. Hosea, who is a prophetic predecessor to Jeremiah in Hosea 6:1, 2 is going to talk about the return and the restoration of the people of Israel after the judgment. What he’s going to say there is, “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us… After two days he will revive us; on the third
day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” So ”Yeah, we may have to go through judgment but in a short time, within two days or within three God’s going to resurrect us and raise us up.” Hananiah is saying the same thing. So if I’m one of those people in Jerusalem that day, where one prophet is wearing a yoke and another prophet is tearing off the yoke, I’m a little confused at this point. It’s difficult to tell the difference.

Jeremiah’s Response

Now, there’s one more thing that adds to the tension as well—Jeremiah’s reaction to Hananiah is also a little unusual because when Hananiah has the chutzpah to step up and break his yoke, I can imagine that the normal reaction of a prophet would be to immediately and angrily get in this guy’s face and point his finger at him. But listen to what Jeremiah says in 28:5, “Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah the prophet in the presence of the priests and all the people … and he said, ‘Amen! May it be. May the Word of the Lord do so; may the Lord make the words that you have prophesied come true, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all of the exiles.’” Jeremiah, when he hears this message, when this prophet has ripped the yoke off his neck and broken it and interrupted Jeremiah’s sermon, Jeremiah says “Amen. You know, I’d like to see that too! Your Message sounds better than the one that I’ve been preaching.” So, unless Jeremiah is speaking sarcastically here, Jeremiah may be expressing a real desire that “Hananiah, maybe God sent you to interrupt me.”

But then we come to see Jeremiah’s fuller response, and Jeremiah’s going to explain to people “Yeah. It would be great if God would do this.” There was always the possibility that God could step in on the 11th hour, but there’s a reason why Hananiah’s message is the wrong message for this particular time. It may have been the right message in the days of Isaiah, but it is not the right message in this particular situation and Jeremiah’s going to explain why.

He’s going to help these people, who had to be struggling, with which
prophet is to be believed. Who’s wearing the black shirt? Who’s wearing the white shirt here? Who’s the good guy? Who’s the bad guy? Who’s the prophet? Who’s telling us the truth? Who’s not? Here’s what’s going to help them sort through this. Jeremiah says in chapter 28, verse 8, “The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied of war, famine and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.” Jeremiah says “You have got your prophetic tradition, but I have my prophetic tradition as well. I can go to Hosea and even Isaiah, your prophet. I can go to Amos. I can go to Micah. There’s a tradition that prophets have announced war, famine, and judgment.” The response when a prophet announces this is to take that warning seriously. Amos says, God always, when he begins to move, God is going to speak through his prophets. So as a result of that the trumpet doesn’t sound unless there’s an emergency to be responded to. So Jeremiah says there’s a prophetic tradition of prophets constantly warning people of judgment, famine and war. The proper thing to do at that time is to assess, are we being unfaithful to God? Are we keeping the covenant commandments? If Judah would honestly do this at this time, instead of just blindly trusting these promises of peace, if they would assess where they stand in relationship to God they would see the idols, they would see the idolatry; they would see their failure to keep God’s commands. This false ideology of peace has blinded their minds to the truth. Jeremiah says, “Look, when a prophet speaks judgment you take it seriously.”

Now Hananiah, as for you,” verse 9, “As for the prophet who prophesied peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.” So when a prophet prophesies judgment we take it seriously and we do an assessment. If a prophet promises peace, we only believe that message when the confirmation comes. Jeremiah sort of lays this challenge out to the false prophets in chapter 27. “You’re pronouncing and you’re announcing that the judgment is going to be over in a little while. Well, everything that going on in terms of contemporary events is arguing against that. There is this
wave of exile, 605 BC, 597 the second group taken away; and here we are in 593 BC and they’re still assessing “Is God really judging us by the hand of Babylon?” Jeremiah is saying, “Look, when a prophet of judgment is warning you, you take time to assess.” If you can’t think about it theologically just take a look at what’s going on. If there’s a prophet that step’s into the midst of this and prophesies peace we’re only going to believe that when it really happens.

He says to the false prophets in chapter 27, verse 18 “if they are prophets and the word of the Lord is with them, then let them intercede with the Lord of hosts, that the vessels that are left in the house of the Lord, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem may not go to Babylon.” He says, “Look if they’re true prophets and they think this crisis is going to be over, let’s give them a little test. Let them pray to God that God do something kind of simple just bring back the vessels that were taken away by Nebuchadnezzar in 597. They can’t even do that. Without some kind of confirmation in light of the disaster circumstances they’re going through and in light of the repeated covenant and fidelity of the Lord, there’s no reason to listen to a prophet of peace at this point.

I think if Jeremiah had got into this debate a little bit more he could’ve said “Look if you want to talk about Isaiah, let’s talk about Isaiah.” Hananiah’s response: “I can go back to Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied the deliverance of Jerusalem, and it happened. You’re right a prophet of peace has to confirm himself but we still have Isaiah.” Jeremiah could’ve gone back to that book and said “The prophet Isaiah only promised deliverance when Hezekiah responded to the word of God in the right way. Without that kind of response there is no reason, there is no basis for your message of peace.

So the people definitely are caught in a quandary here. Who do we believe? Jeremiah says in light of the circumstances, in light of your covenant infidelity I’m just in the long tradition of prophets who have warned about calamity and disaster. In the past people have responded to this by taking it seriously. If you’re really going to believe this guy’s message that within 2 yoms all of this is going to be
over let’s see some evidence to show this.

So Jeremiah ultimately says “Amen. Let it happen.” But he pronounces God’s judgment and the sentence that’s going to fall on Hananiah. There’s a pretty serious thing here. Because of his opposition to the message, here’s what Jeremiah says. “For the nation in the place of the wooden yoke that you broke God is going to put an iron yoke in its place (28:13). Look you listen to these false prophets and here’s what God is going to bring against you. For Hananiah personally, Jeremiah says this “Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you. You can do all the prophetic mirroring that you want but the Lord has not sent you and you have made these people to trust in a lie. Therefore, thus says the Lord, behold I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.”

It tells us, the last verse in verse 17: “In that same year in the 7th month the prophet Hananiah died.” Here’s the irony. Here the punishment that fits the crime. Hananiah said that in 2 years the crisis will be over. The reality was within 2 months Hananiah was dead. The prophets of peace were promising life. The reality is what the people will experience is, if they follow them, the same death that the prophets themselves experienced they will experience.

Prophetic Conflict in Jer 29

Let us go on to the third example of prophetic conflict in Jeremiah chapter 29 and again the issue is going to be over submission to Babylon. Now the context of the opposition changes here because now the prophets who are opposing Jeremiah are in Babylon. So God had his true prophet in Babylon. God had Ezekiel there. God had Daniel, but the people had their false prophets there as well and they were preaching the same message of peace. This is not going to last long. This will be over in a short while. Here’s Jeremiah’s message to the exiles in Babylon he sends them a letter in the early parts of chapter 29 in verse 4 here’s what he tells them: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles to all to whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and
live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and
daughters; take wives for your sons give your daughters in marriage, that they may
bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare
of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord God on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare. [or in your shalom that will come
through the shalom of Babylon]. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:
do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you,” and
do not listen to their false and empty promises. So, here’s Jeremiahs message; it’s
the same thing he was saying to the people that were still in the land: “Submit to
Babylon.”

Babylon replaces Jerusalem

For the exiles, that meant recognize that you’re going to be here for a while.
Settle down, do the things that you do in normal life, build your houses, plant
vineyards, grow your crops, and have children. Babylon in a sense, for these
people, has taken the place of the promise land; it has become their promised land.
God had said to Israel in Deuteronomy 6, I am going to give you cities and houses
and vineyards that you didn’t plant, you’re going to enjoy all these things in the
promised land. Well now, temporarily Babylon has become their promise land.
This is going to be where they experience those things that were associated with
the covenant blessings in God’s original arrangement with Israel. Have children;
bear children there. Pray for the peace of Babylon. Remember the Psalm that tells
us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Babylon has replaced Jerusalem. So you can
imagine this is pretty subversive theology. If Jerusalem is not the city of shalom
anymore, Babylon is! And if you will settle there, and if you will submit to
Babylon, and give up these ideas that you’re going to be there a short while, the
Lord ultimately is going to restore you.

Real Hope Jer 29:11

Here is the real hope that Judah has, in contrast to the false hopes that the
prophets are giving them. And in in verse 10 “When the seventy years are
completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” Alright, settle down, the exile is going to last for a while, and here’s the verse, maybe the only verse that many people know in Jeremiah, “For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Be careful of claiming someone else’s promises for yourself. There is a general promise here that God has the welfare and the well-being of his people in mind, but recognize that this is not a general promise; that people who know and love God are never going to experience difficulty; that the Lord is always going to deliver you out of harm; this promise is given to people who have already been taken away in judgment. Promise is given to people who are living in exile already. And this promise is given to people who in many ways are not going to experience the blessings themselves; it’s a blessing that’s given to their children after them.

One contemporary Christian writer has said about Jeremiah 29 that the passage gives us a promise that wonderful changes take place in your life as soon as we begin to live our lives according to God’s purpose. I do think, Romans 8:28 “God works all things together for good” but this is not a promise that everything that you do as a believer will prosper. It’s not a general guarantee. People do the same thing with Philippians chapter 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” It is the athletes favorite verse, everyone has it on their hat, or their shoes, or their gloves; “I can do all things, I can hit the homerun in the 9th inning.” But be careful of taking these promises that are in a specific context, here this is a promise given to these exiles that God ultimately is going to bring them out of judgment and danger.

The message that Jeremiah gave, because of the subversiveness of its theology, was opposed by a group of prophets. Now the prophets are not Hananiah and the ones located in Judah, it’s the prophets that are in Babylon among the exiles. A couple of them are mentioned in this section; two of them in verse 21, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab” who
was one of these prophets, and another one named Zedekiah. This is not the king, this is a prophet by the same name. They “are prophesying a lie to you in my name.” They were promising “look, the exile will be over in a little while.” Jeremiah is saying, it’s 70 years, settle down here. These prophets hate that message because they are offering empty promises of peace.

Jeremiah says “Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and he will strike them down before your eyes. Because of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah and Babylon. ‘The Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the King of Babylon roasted in a fire.” In some way Nebuchadnezzar ultimately viewed their promises of peace as being subversive and he put them to death; he roasted them in the fire.

I want us to notice this, what happens to Hananiah? He dies within 2 months. What happens to Ahab and Zedekiah? Their promising, “The Lord will prosper you and everything is going to go well,” they die because of their message. Very interesting, the prophets of peace ultimately are associated with death. Real life comes from following the prophets who are truly speaking the word of the Lord. It’s not an easy message, it’s not a message that dismisses the idea of judgment, but the empty promises of peace are never going to deliver on what they promised. You can see that in the lives of the prophets themselves.

Finally the last prophet that’s mentioned here is Shemaiah. And Shemaiah, like Hananiah, is going to engage in an act of prophetic mirroring. Jeremiah, thus says the Lord, and he writes a letter to express that, Shemaiah is going to write a letter in the opposite direction back to the religious leaders in Jerusalem and say, “This man Jeremiah, that’s telling the exiles that they’re not going to be delivered that they should just settle down, that man needs to be censored; he needs to be put in prison. This whole conflict of prophetic mirroring goes on again centered on “whose word is going to stand.” Jeremiah says, “Shemaiah because he’s spoken a lie, because he has not delivered the word of the Lord, this man will never
experience the blessings of restoration.

So constantly throughout the section the prophets of peace are the ones who are offering these empty hopes. But it’s Jeremiah’s message that gives life. It’s a message that says, “you need to recognize your sin, you need to recognize the judgment that God is bringing on you and God will ultimately restore us when we turn back to him. Prophetic conflict is the prophets of peace versus the messengers of the Lord, the true messengers of God. That’s what this section is about. The decision the people make about their response to this message, the decision that the leaders of Judah are going to make about this message is in chapter 37-39. We are going to see it is absolutely a matter of life and death how we respond to God’s word. It is the most important decision in life, and we are constantly reminded throughout the book of Jeremiah: how do we listen to God’s word? It is an issue of life and death.
Zedekiah’s Disobedience and the Fall of Jerusalem (Jer 37-39)

Our focus in this lesson is Jeremiah, chapters 37 through 39. We are dealing with the disobedience of Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem. Obviously, we understand that these are very important chapters, because they’re dealing with the central event that took place in Jeremiah’s life and ministry—the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. What the theology of Jeremiah is going to develop for us is that this fall of Jerusalem is the direct result of the king, and the people, and the officials of Judah not listening to the word of the Lord.

Again, the greatest theological crisis perhaps in the Old Testament is the exile, and how God allowed the temple to be destroyed. What’s happened in all of this? We see passages in the Psalms, where the people are wrestling with this and struggling with what happens to the future of God’s people. Psalm 89 asks: what has happened to God’s covenant with David? So, this is a major event.

The theological message of Jeremiah is that it is directly connected to the failure of the people to respond. It is not God abandoning his people. It is not God failing on his covenant promises. It is Israel, who is failed in the covenant by not listening to or obeying the Lord. We see in the design and in the literary structure of Jeremiah 26-45, that Jeremiah 37-39 is closely related to the passage that we looked at last time in chapters 27-29. Both of them are dealing with the last days of Judah as a nation. They’re dealing with the time of Zedekiah, and they’re dealing with the very responses that people have to Jeremiah’s message: submit to the Babylonians; the exile is going to last for 70 years; and God is using the Babylonians as an instrument of judgment. In many ways, that was a subversive message, the idea that God had given control of Judah over to these pagan Babylonians. The false prophets of peace were the ones that were particularly opposing this message. We saw in chapters 27-29, the whole issue of prophetic
Conflict and how very real that was. We almost get a chance to put ourselves on the streets of Jerusalem in the last days of Judah as a nation. Putting ourselves in the minds of the people we wonder, who’s telling us the truth here?

Prophetic Conflict in Micah

Now, this problem with false prophets, and prophetic conflict, and the engagement in those kinds of issues is not just found in the book of Jeremiah. But it’s also briefly reflected for us also in the prophet Micah, and I wanted to just reference a couple of verses here as a follow up to what we talked about last time. Remember, Micah preached a century before Jeremiah. He announced that the city of Jerusalem was going to be destroyed, and Jeremiah 26 specifically says that it was the preaching of Micah and those warnings of the destruction of Jerusalem that motivated Hezekiah’s response of repentance.

As Micah was preaching that message, and pronouncing and proclaiming the judgment that was coming, he was as opposed in the same way as Jeremiah by prophets of peace, who had the defective view of the covenant, that believed that God would protect Israel. They were his chosen people, no harm could befall them. God would look over his house. God would protect the Davidic King. So their response to Micah as he’s preaching Jerusalem’s going to be leveled, it’s going to be reduced to a heap of rubble. They said these things: “Do not preach” thus they preach, “One should not preach of such things. Disgrace will not overtake us. Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Has the Lord grown impatient? Are these his deeds?” They were saying: Look, you shouldn’t really preach this way. Why would God bring judgment against his people?

Then in chapter 2, verse 11, Micah, thinking of how the people have responded to that and how they want to hear the messages of peace rather than the messages of judgment, he says to them, “If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, ‘I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,’ he would be just the preacher for these people!” Look, you don’t want to hear my messages of judgment, but if
someone were to come along and say God is going to give you plenty of beer and wine to drink, you’re going to experience all kind of pleasure and prosperity. That would be the guy you want to hear. But, I’m warning you, those kinds of people are only speaking lies and wind to you. I’m telling you the truth.

In chapter 3:5-6, Micah talking about the false prophets says, “Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace!” He is dealing with the same kinds of prophets Jeremiah had that were saying: “Peace, peace.” They say peace “when they have something to eat, but they declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths.” So, they’re not only offered empty promises of peace, but if you pay them the right price, they’ll tell you what they want you to say. They’ll offer you promises of peace, but if you don’t give them a good love offering they’re going to announce judgment on you. So, Micah was struggling with false prophets, and ultimately Hezekiah made the right choice to respond to God, to listen to the warnings of judgment, to take those things seriously, and Jerusalem was spared in 701 BC in part because of that.

Why the Destruction? No Response to God’s Word

Jeremiah in chapters, 37-39, is preaching that God is going to bring destruction on Jerusalem. Zedekiah is not going to respond in the right way. The first thing that we read in chapter 37:1-2, introducing the section, is an important summary statement for Jeremiah 26-45 as a whole says this: “Zedekiah the son of Josiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah, reigned instead of Coniah [or Jehoiachin] the son of Jehoiakim. But neither he nor his servants, nor the people of the land listened to the words of the Lord that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet.” So, why is the destruction of Jerusalem that’s described for us in chapter 39, that’s also recounted for us at the end of the book of Jeremiah, in chapter 52, why did it happen? Because the king and the people did not respond to the word of the Lord.

What we see in Jeremiah 37-39, leading up to the account where we have the actual fall of the city is that we have five separate episodes that are dealing
with the response to Jeremiah’s message of how we submit to Babylon. Back in chapters 27-29, we had Jeremiah repeating three times saying, “Submit to Babylon, surrender to his authority, don’t listen to the prophets who are trying to deceive you.” In the same way, we’re going to have various episodes where Jeremiah is going to talk about the need to surrender to the Babylonians and what kind of response did that receive?

Now the layout of this, in these five episodes, is also going to follow a specific pattern. We’re going to have a pattern again where we have a type of paneling going on. We have A and B elements that are being laid beside each other. We have an A element in chapter 37 verses 3-5, where we have King Zedekiah interacting with Jeremiah and his response to the message that they need to surrender to the Babylonians. Chapter 37:6-10, we have a B element where we have the military officials that are under Zedekiah, giving their response to Jeremiah. Chapter 37 goes back to the A element. We have a story of Jeremiah interacting with King Zedekiah. Then the next B element again, it’s the military officials in chapters 38:1-12 and their response to Jeremiah’s message and their hostility to this message that Jeremiah’s preaching that they believe is decreasing the war effort and hindering their resistance against Babylon. Then finally, at the end of chapter 37 from verses 17 to the end of the chapter, we have the A element again of where Jeremiah is interacting with King Zedekiah. So, in this ABABA contrast in Jeremiah’s different interactions with the king and the royal officials, we again see some narrative parallelism that helps us to see the recurring examples of response to the Word of the Lord.

We also have narrative parallelism in chapters 37-39 in the sense that the disobedient response of Zedekiah is placed beside the earlier disobedient response of Jehoiakim in chapter 36 as well. Jehoiakim was the king who reigned from 609 to 597; he did not listen to the word of the Lord. In fact, when the word of the Lord came to him, he became angry and hostile. He killed Uriah in chapter 26. He cut up the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies in chapter 36. Now, the responses of
Zedekiah, chapter 37-39 are placed right beside that. Zedekiah is the king in the last days from 597-586 BC. Neither he, nor his people, nor the attendants listened to the word of the Lord as well. So in whatever time frame you’re looking at, whatever time period of Jeremiah’s ministry you’re considering, the leaders and the officials and the people did not listen to the word of the Lord.

Jehoiakim and Zedekiah and the Word of God

Zedekiah is as deserving of God’s judgment as Jehoiakim. Now that’s a little bit surprising because when you compare the two individuals, they look very different. Jehoiakim becomes angry and becomes violent whenever he’s confronted with the word of the Lord. He does not fear God. It appears that he has no regard whatsoever for the prophetic word. He has no fear of the consequences that could happen. There is never a time where Jehoiakim and Jeremiah have a meeting with each other because it’s just too volatile. The relationship between these men is too explosive. Jeremiah can’t be in the presence of this king because if he is, the king is going to seize him and do the same thing to him that he did to Uriah and have him put to death. On the other hand, when we come to Zedekiah, we have a much different kind of individual. We have a king who is constantly interacting with the prophet. There are the messages where Jeremiah is speaking to Zedekiah, they’re dialoging with each other, Zedekiah is constantly asking him: “Is there a word from the Lord?” And every time he asked him, “Is there a word from the Lord?” the message is essentially the same. But we have him three different times here asking “is there a word from the Lord?” But we have already seen Jeremiah and Zedekiah interacting with each other earlier in the book as well.

Chapter 21:4-10, Zedekiah says to Jeremiah, “Would you pray for us that the Lord might bring us deliverance?” Chapter 32:1-5 again Jeremiah’s message is: “this is what’s going to happen to the king if he doesn’t submit.” Chapter 34:1-7 is another time where Zedekiah says, “Is there a word from the Lord about what’s going to happen?” The word of the Lord is the same every time.

Now Chapter 34 is interesting because it seems like there, Jeremiah gives
Zedekiah a more positive response: “You’re going to be able to die in peace.” It seems like things could go well for Zedekiah. Some critical scholars have looked at this and they’ve tried to separate out different editors, and different redactors have composed these different responses to Zedekiah. But what I think we have going on is that we have the possibility of different outcomes based on how Zedekiah will respond to the word of the Lord. You see, in spite of the fact that Judah has really crossed over the line, in spite of the fact that God has had all of these moveable deadlines and ultimately they’ve reached a point of irrevocable judgment, God is still giving Zedekiah some flags that, if he will respond to Jeremiah’s message and surrender, then his life will be spared and things will turn out for him much better than they actually did. Jeremiah is saying in chapter 34 “You’re going to die in peace.” When we look at what happens to Zedekiah in chapter 39 we realize that he forfeited the opportunity of this positive outcome by the way that he responded to God’s word.

Now Zedekiah is constantly having these conferences with the Jeremiah. He’s different from Jehoiakim. He doesn’t get angry, he doesn’t threaten the life of the prophet, he often does things to help the prophet in some sense, partly because Zedekiah is as afraid of the officials as Jeremiah is. But ultimately he’s just as disobedient as Jehoiakim. It doesn’t matter if someone is rebellious, hostile and angry toward the word of God or just indifferent and fearful to carry through on what God tells him to do, ultimately that’s disobedience. Whether someone angrily rejects the Gospel and says, “I don’t want to hear that, get away from me,” or someone politely hears it and then ignores what it says, they both stand under God’s condemnation. I think that’s really what you see in the narrative parallelism in the second panel here is that the disobedience of Zedekiah is paralleled to the disobedience of Jehoiakim. Ultimately, they’re in the same boat.

Episodes

So let’s look at these five episodes, chapter 37:3-5. Zedekiah says this in verse 3, “please pray for us to the Lord our God.” So here’s the initiation of the
conflict: “we need prayer.” Remember what God has said to Jeremiah in back in chapter 7, chapter 11, chapter 14, and chapter 15? “Do not pray for these people.” So the prophet ultimately is not going to be able to do what the king is asking him to do. Now what exactly is the king asking Jeremiah to pray for? Is he asking Jeremiah “pray that the Lord would give me wisdom to obey him and the strength and courage to follow through on what God is telling me to do”? No, that’s not exactly what he’s praying for. We learn in chapter 21:2, which maybe is simply a parallel account of the same event that we’re reading in chapter 37. Here’s what he’s actually asking God to do: “Inquire for the Lord for us for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is making war against us. Perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all of his wonderful deeds and make him withdraw from us.” So he is not asking for the courage and the moral fiber to do what God wants him to do. He’s asking for God to get him out of this situation. When we come back to chapter 37, and the encounter there and the episode, Jeremiah is not going to pray for him. He’s not going to give him the opportunity that God is going to rescue him out of this. He’s going to tell him the situation is hopeless.

Now I’ve brought this up a number of times and I promise this is probably the last time that I’ll mention this. But whenever we’re hearing these stories about the coming fall of Jerusalem, we always have what’s happened with Hezekiah and the city of Jerusalem in 701 BC that’s still echoing. It hasn’t been that long ago and it was a miraculous deliverance. God had stepped in at the eleventh hour, it had fulfilled, confirmed and in a sense validated, the traditions that the people of Judah had about Jerusalem that God was always going to protect the city. So when Hezekiah experiences this deliverance, what Zedekiah is asking for when he prays, “maybe the Lord will relent; maybe the Lord will deliver us,” he’s asking maybe God will do for us a “Hezekiah deliverance.”

Now we saw with Jeremiah’s interaction with Jehoiakim, that that is not going to happen because king Jehoiakim, you are no Hezekiah, you are no Josiah, your judgment is going to come. But we’re back to this possibility- we’ve got a
new king here, we’ve got a king who is at least willing to invite the prophet in, and hear what the prophet has to say: Maybe there’s the possibility that God will bring about a deliverance. Maybe we’re going to experience another one of these “Hezekiah deliverances.”

Well. Listen to what God is going to say to the prophet, or, what God’s going to say to the king and to the officials: “Thus says the Lord God of Israel: Thus you shall say to the king of Judah who is sent you to me to inquire of me, “Behold, Pharaoh’s army that came to help you is about to return to Egypt, to its own land. And the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against this city. They shall capture it and burn it with fire. Thus says the Lord, Do not deceive yourself saying, “The Chaldeans will surely go away for us,” for they will not go away. For even if you should defeat the whole army of the Chaldeans who are fighting against you, and there remained of them only wounded men, every man in his tent, they would rise up and they would burn this city.”

So, partly what had motivated Zedekiah to come to Jeremiah and ask him to pray for him is that there had been a positive turn of events. The Egyptians had marched up and they were offering help to Judah because they didn’t want the Babylonians encroaching on their territory. They knew that if the Babylonians ultimately take Judah that just makes them closer to invading our land, so they’re trying to help Judah to stop this. Zedekiah is trusting in this alliance, with Egypt, as possibly being the thing that will deliver him. Jeremiah comes and he absolutely explodes any possible hopeful resolution to this: The Egyptians are not going to help you. Their military interventionist situation is not going to turn this situation around. In fact, if your army marched out and defeated the Chaldeans, the wounded people that were left in the Chaldeans, they could still capture this city. Remember how David had gone in, and ultimately captured Jerusalem with the small group of people that had sort of snuck into the city. The Chaldeans are going to do that. There is no getting away from this. Even if you could have a major military victory, it’s not going to work.
Jeremiah & Isaiah Contrast

Well, this sort of sets Jeremiah up, let’s contrast Jeremiah and Isaiah as a prophet. Isaiah: “the Lord is going to deliver this city. Sennacherib and his armies, they will not fire a single arrow into this city.” I’m sure the king was thinking, why we couldn’t just have one of those prophets from the good old days like Isaiah. Jeremiah seems like kind of a lesser guy. Isaiah is tight enough with God that he can guarantee the Lord’s deliverance, we have sort of got a second class prophet that all he can tell us is judgment.

Pete Diamond provided some interesting intertextual studies of this part of Jeremiah and one of the things that he noticed is that there are definitely some intertextual connections between the story of Isaiah and Hezekiah and then of Jeremiah and Zedekiah. The interesting thing here is that Jeremiah definitely comes off looking like a lesser prophet. In fact, what Diamond is going to suggest is that if you go back to the story of Isaiah and Hezekiah, the individual in that story that Jeremiah most closely resembles is the pagan Assyrian Rabshakeh, the commander of the Assyrian army, who is telling the king of Judah, “it’s hopeless for you to try to withstand our army.” So, if we’re going to do an intertextual comparison between Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jeremiah doesn’t look like an Isaiah, Jeremiah looks more like a pagan Rabshakeh, the commander of the Assyrian army who’s telling the people of Judah, “look it’s hopeless, there is no way you are ever going to be delivered from our army!”

In fact, listen to this passage from Jeremiah 37:4-10 and compare it to what we just heard Jeremiah saying to King Zedekiah. “Look, even if you defeat the Babylonians, even if the Egyptians come and help you, the wounded guys in the Babylonian army that are in the hospital they’re the ones that could come in and burn the city.” Listen to what the Rabshakeh says; and it’s in Isaiah chapter 36:4-9. “Say to Hezekiah: ‘Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours? [You know, that the city of Jerusalem is going to be protected]. Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In
whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting in Egypt!”

Hezekiah had done the same thing that Zedekiah was doing. He had made an alliance with Egypt and thought that the military assistance of the Egyptians was going to help him. It’s not going to help. Jeremiah is saying the same thing that the Rabshakeh says in Jeremiah chapter 37. The Rabshakeh also says Egypt is just a broken reed of a staff which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is the pharaoh the king of Egypt to all who trust in him. So you’re putting your trust in this army that’s going to help you, but they’re not going to be a help. The pharaoh is going to be like a broken reed that’s going to puncture your hand; he’s not going to deliver you. He goes on to say in verse eight: ‘Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria, I will give you two thousand horses. If you’re able on your part to set riders on them, how then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master’s servants when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up to this land and destroy it.”

So, in every way, if you’re going to do an intertextual comparison between Isaiah and Jeremiah and Hezekiah and Zedekiah, Jeremiah doesn’t come out looking too good. He looks like the Assyrian Rabshakeh. Don’t trust in the LORD to deliver you. Jeremiah says: Look! Even if you defeat the army, even if you defeat the Chaldeans, the wounded guys in the hospital will still defeat you! The Rabshakeh, the Assyrian commander taunts them and says: Look, let’s make this a fair fight. I will give you two thousand horses! You don’t even have enough of an army to put guys on the horses. I’ll help you out here. Even then, I would still defeat you. The Rabshakeh says, “Look, I didn’t come up here on my own strength, the Lord sent me to come and to defeat this people.” Jeremiah says, ‘The Lord is the one who has brought up the Babylonian army. The Lord is the one who will give Jerusalem into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar.”
You know in every possible way here, the only person that Jeremiah looks like is not Isaiah, not a true prophet of God, he looks like the Assyrian commander and just like this pagan who said, “Don’t trust in the Lord to deliver you.” It almost sounds like that’s what Jeremiah is saying as well. But the twist and the punch line of this intertextual analysis is that the problem is not the prophet. The problem is not that Jeremiah is a lesser prophet than Isaiah. The problem is not that Jeremiah shares the theology of a pagan commander. The problem is that there is not going to be a response in the life of Zedekiah comparable to the response of Hezekiah. Therefore there can be no deliverance. There can be no army marching in at the eleventh hour to deliver because there’s no response of faith here by Zedekiah. So the intertextuality that appears to diminish the ministry of Jeremiah is again making the same point that Jeremiah had earlier made to Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim, you’re no Hezekiah. The prophet is now saying the same thing to Zedekiah. Look, there has been no response; there’s been no repentance. Therefore God cannot bring deliverance.

Zedekiah’s Responses

What kind of response does this get from Zedekiah? There’s no indication that he’s ever going to respond in a positive way. In fact what happens is now we have the intervention of the military officers in our B element in chapter 37 verses 11 and following: “Now when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh’s army, Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin to receive his portion there among the people.” This is probably dealing with the purchase of land that he had made back in chapter 32. But when he is getting ready to leave the city, it says that a group of military officials seized him. I’m not going to read their names this time like I did in one of the earlier videos and massacre them, but here’s what they said to them. They seized Jeremiah and said, “You are deserting over to the Chaldeans. This confirms exactly what we think about you. You’re a traitor. And this whole message, and this whole idea that we need to surrender to the Babylonians, you’re defecting
over to them to try to get away.” In some sense you would think they’d be glad to be rid of him, but they accuse him of defection. Jeremiah says, “It is a lie. I am not deserting to the Chaldeans.” But they would not listen. They seized Jeremiah, they imprisoned him, and they beat him.

So, in the A element, we have the response of the king. He can’t accept what Jeremiah has to say, he’s fearful of that. Then chapters 37:11-15, to B, we have the episode where Jeremiah is interacting with the military officers. They’re hostile, they’re angry, and they’re accusing Jeremiah of being a traitor. As a result of that they beat him and put him in prison.

Confronting Zedekiah Again (Jer 37:16-21)

Now back to the A element. The next episode again is going to be Jeremiah repeating to Zedekiah, “You need to surrender to the Babylonians.” Chapter 37:16-21: Jeremiah is put in prison, he remains there many days. Here’s what happens in verse 17, we’ve seen this before: ‘King Zedekiah sent for him and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house and said, ‘Is there any word from the Lord?’” I haven’t gotten God’s perspective on this yet, is there any word from the Lord? Jeremiah’s response should have been: Yes, you’ve already heard it numerous times! But Jeremiah says, “There is! You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.” Jeremiah also said to Zedekiah, “What wrong have I done to you, or your servants, or this people, that you have put me in prison?” And verse 19, “Where are your prophets who prophesied to you saying, ‘The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land’?” So we’re back to the prophetic conflict: Look, if those guys were right, why aren’t you talking to them? Is there a word from the Lord? The only thing, again, there’s no response. Zedekiah is not going to follow the word of the Lord. The only thing that he does here is that he gives Jeremiah a more favorable prison to stay in. Instead of the dungeon that the military officers have put him in Jeremiah is going to be put in the court of the guard and be given more favorable conditions. He’s also going to be given a loaf of bread. But that’s not enough. It’s just taking care
of the prophet and preserving his life. If he really wants to listen to what God has to say here, he needs to carry through and obey. But the idea that you get is he’s coming secretly, he’s inquiring. He’s as fearful of these military officers and what they might do to him, as Jeremiah is.

Back to the Military Officers (Jer 38:1-16)

So we’ve had this A element, the king meets with the prophet. We have the B element, the military officers meet with the prophet and they imprison him, they accuse him of being a traitor. Then we’re back to the king, and in chapter 38:1-16, the next episode, we’re back to Jeremiah interacting with the military officers. And again, the response that the officers are going to have is one of anger. They’re going to say, “Why do you keep preaching this message that he who stays in this city shall die by the sword?” They bring this to the king. Verse 4: “This man is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in the city.” The same expression that’s found in the Lachish letters where military officers there are discussing how the troops have become demoralized and it talks about “the weakening of their hands.” They’re discouraged. They don’t want to keep fighting. Jeremiah’s message is directly the cause of that, they say. So as a result of that what we need to do is we need to get rid of Jeremiah, and they throw him into a cistern.

Zedekiah, being the weak leader that he is, vacillating back and forth, fearful of these officers and these commanders, he says, “Behold, he’s in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you.’ So they took Jeremiah, and they threw him into the cistern. And they leave him there to die. It is only the intervention of an officer by the name of Ebed-Melek, a foreigner, who says to the king, “We can’t do this great evil. Jeremiah is a messenger of God.” And this foreigner, this Ethiopian, convinces the king to rescue Jeremiah out of the cistern. We’ll talk about Ebed-Melek a little bit more.

Return to Zedekiah (Jer 38:14ff)

But notice the response of the officers. We go back and forth, the vacillation of Zedekiah, the anger of the officers. This is going to play itself out in
one more encounter, between Jeremiah and the king. There are just a couple of things I’m going to note here. Chapter 38:14: “King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord.” He’s going to have his moment at the temple of the Lord in the same way that Jehoiakim did back in chapter 36 and 26. The king said to Jeremiah, “I will ask you a question. Hide nothing from me.” Alright, he hasn’t hidden anything from the king. But he’s going to inquire again, “Do you have a word from the Lord?”

And I just want to mention a few specific things here, as we go into verse 17 and 18. Here’s the word from the Lord. You know what it is: “surrender to the Babylonians and be spared. If you surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon then your life shall be spared and this city will not be burned with fire and your house shall live.” There’s an ‘if/then’ conditional going on here. You have the chance to avoid God’s judgment, but if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon then this city shall be given into the hands of the Chaldeans, so the choice is yours.

The message has not changed; it’s exactly what we’ve heard the prophet saying time and time again: three separate times in chapters 37 and 38. This again, reminds us of back in chapter 27, three separate times: submit to the king of Babylon to these different groups. There’s clearly a parallel here.

But finally, in verse 19, we get an explanation from King Zedekiah of exactly what it is that’s keeping him from obeying the word of the Lord. Here’s what Zedekiah says, “I am afraid of the Judeans, who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they deal cruelly with me.” Look, I’m afraid of these guys who have already been taken hostage and taken into exile to Babylon, or maybe the people that have defected over to the Babylonians. They’re going to blame me for all the things that are happening, and if I get put in prison with these guys, somebody’s going to give me the shiv in the middle of the night. So he’s scared. So, ultimately, it is fear of men that keeps him from properly fearing and responding to God. Zedekiah is more afraid of what’s going to happen
to him if he’s captured and given over to these other Jewish prisoners than he is of what will happen to him if he fails to listen to the word of God. The consequences and the disaster that’s going to come when you don’t listen to the word of God is always going to be far more severe. But he’s afraid of men. He’s afraid of what’s going to happen to him, and Jeremiah’s trying to say, “look you need to understand what’s going to happen if you don’t listen to God.”

Then, finally, here’s a last statement that Jeremiah’s going to make to the king in verse 21: “But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision that the Lord has shown to me: Behold, all of the women left in the house of the king of Judea were being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon” and the women were saying.” Now, let’s listen to these words because there’s something important here. “Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you, now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you.” So he pictures Zedekiah being arrested and the women of the palace saying, “Zedekiah look at what’s happened to you; the friends and the allies and the officers, they have turned away from you, and your feet have sunk in the mud.” Now the wording is not exactly the same, but I can’t help but hear as I read that, the officers throw Jeremiah in the mud and it says, earlier in this chapter, verse 6, “there was no water in the cistern but only mud, and Jeremiah sunk in the mud.” That was bad, there are some bad circumstances. The real prisoner in this story is Zedekiah. He was in much worse shape than Jeremiah being thrown into the cistern and left to sink in the mud because God had ultimately promised to deliver him. Zedekiah has sunken in the mud and there’s not going to be anyone to deliver him because he has not listen to the word of the Lord. When the city of Jerusalem is going to be captured, Jeremiah is released! Zedekiah is not going to be released, and like a prisoner who is thrown into a cistern, Zedekiah’s feet are going to sink into the mud.

Zedekiah’s Final Days

Now we come to the end of chapter 38 and the last words Zedekiah and Jeremiah share with each other is Zedekiah’s making it clear he doesn’t want
Jeremiah to tell anyone what they’ve talked about. But the last verse of this chapter speaks to me in a significant way, here it says, “Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day Jerusalem was taken.” We’ve seen some of these summary statements about Jeremiah being in prison before that sort of wraps up these different episodes. But there’s nothing in this story, there’s nothing in this passage that tells us about the response of Zedekiah to the word of the Lord. It reminds me in some ways of what the narrator does in chapter 36 when Baruch reads the scroll in the hearing of all the people and there’s no mention of their response.

The word has been read in the presence of the king. He simply allows the events to unfold. The resistance continues, he does not listen to the word of the Lord and the first statement that we read in chapter 39 is a title telling us that now the city of Jerusalem is going to fall.

There’s a real sense of prophetic justice here in that the man who allowed Jeremiah’s feet to sink in the mud is ultimately going to be the one who sinks in the mud as a prisoner. Jeremiah is going to be released; Zedekiah is not. I won’t go through all the details of the stories; we have talked about the fall of Jerusalem before. But let me just remind you of what happens to Zedekiah. His response to the word of God is a big part of chapters 37 and 38 and so it’s important for the narrator to stress that what happens to Zedekiah is a result of this; God is meeting out justice. This is what happens to kings, to people, and to leaders when they fail to listen to God’s word – God’s word is a matter of life and death.

When the city of Jerusalem is captured, Zedekiah and his sons attempt to flee by night. They make it about ten or fifteen miles outside of Jerusalem, and they are captured in the plains of Jericho. Then they are shackled up and they are brought as prisoners to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, which is to the north of Syria. Because Zedekiah is a rebel against the Babylonians, they had set him up on the throne as their puppet, you know, “take care of our interests, submit to us, pay tribute to us, maintain the situation here and we’ll allow you to stay on the throne
and pretend to be a king,” and that’s in a sense what it was. Zedekiah was too weak as a ruler to even do that. So Nebuchadnezzar pronounces sentence on him as a rebel and the sentence is that Zedekiah’s sons are executed in front of him. Then the Babylonians gouge out Zedekiah’s eyes. I can’t help but think about the fact that his unwillingness to hear the word of the Lord ultimately leads to a sentence of blindness and imprisonment in chapter 39. There are serious consequences to spiritual blindness. I don’t know if there’s a particular connection here but we are almost reminded of what happens to Samson at the end of his life—he is blinded and taken away as a prisoner. Zedekiah is going to die as a Babylonian prisoner, as a blind man deprived of his sons because of his failure to obey the word of the Lord.

There is also a sense of justice here in that the officers and the king who have kept Jeremiah in prison, and the prison provides such a context to Jeremiah’s ministry, the people who had done that to Jeremiah will now experience their own form of imprisonment and while God made it possible for Jeremiah to be released in the Babylonians’ when they take the city. They’re going to be the liberators who release him from prison. The captivity that the officers and the king who inflicted these things on Jeremiah there is not going to be a deliverance for them and all that the people and all that the leaders and all that the king of Judah had to look forward to who did not obey the word of the Lord is a sentence of imprisonment. There will not be a release until the time that Cyrus conquers the city of Babylon and allows the Jews to return to their home land. This would be for another generation.

So we’ve spent some time in chapters 26-45 looking at all of the ways that the narrator demonstrates that the fall of Jerusalem and the judgment of Jerusalem was absolutely deserved. There is a sense of prophetic justice here because this is the punishment that Judah received for failing to hear the word of the Lord. The people that inflicted imprisonment and persecution on Jeremiah are now going to experience their own forms of persecution and imprisonment.
Remnant: Positive Responses to the Word of God

So as we’re looking at all of this section and we’re thinking about all the things that we have talked about in the previous sections this is a pretty depressing part of the Bible. The offer of life that is given to Judah in the beginning of each one of these panels in chapter 26 the only people who experience it are the Rechabites in chapter 35. In the second panel the offer of life that is offered to Israel when the temple scroll is read in 605 BC the only person who responds in a positive way to that is Baruch. But if we go back to this section of the book of Jeremiah were also going to see that sometimes between the lines and sometimes is minor figures here there are other positive examples of obedience to the prophetic word and to the word of the Lord. So I would like us to close out this lesson by looking at some of those positive examples of obedient people who did listen to the word of the Lord. We have such a negative example here was that the consequences of what happened to the people at large but let’s remember some of the positive examples that we’ve been introduced to in chapters 26-45 as well.

First of all, going back to the Temple Sermon remember the response where the officials and the people say to the priest and the prophets “This man does not deserve the sentence of death for he has spoken into us in the name of the Lord our God.” They recognized Jeremiah as the true prophet the tragedy is that they don’t really respond to that or really do anything about it but there is a positive response here.

Chapter 26 verse 24 tells us that when the King Jehoiakim executed Uriah the prophet it says in verse 24 but the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so he was not given over to be put to death. So this family of Shaphan and throughout the book of Jeremiah there are going to be supporters who are going to take his message seriously and at this time when Jehoiakim is trying to wipe out the prophets of judgment he’s taking care of one of the witnesses. Maybe if I can get rid of the other one, we can do the same to Jeremiah. Ahikam intervenes and uses influence to protect Jeremiah. He hides him away so
the king can’t get his hands on him. The family of Shaphan this scribal family, is
gothing to be an example of positive response to the word of the Lord.

Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch is a positive example of obedience to the Lord
when the Lord has him write down the message that Jeremiah dictates to him.
Baruch is the one who faithfully carries out that commission and goes to the
temple and with all of the risks that are involved with all of that he does what the
Lord commands him to do. In a very real way Baruch is as much a faithful servant
of God as Jeremiah himself, so that’s why in chapter 45 he’s the one who is
positively rewarded at the end of this. Chapter 36 verse 11 of when Baruch reads
the scroll and the people at large basically ignore this, it does tell us in verse 11
chapter 36 Micaiah the son of Gemariah the son of Shaphan heard all of these
words.” Again, it’s a family member in this scribal family from Shaphan who
listens to God’s word and takes it to the other officials. They realize, “we have got
a crisis here, we need to take this to the king.” There were at least a group of
people that day when the nation ignored it, when the king destroyed the scroll,
there were at least some scribes and officials who listened to what the prophet had
to say.

We very quickly were introduced to Ebed Melek chapter 38 verses 7-13 it’s
ironic that the one officer who steps into the situation here and says, “Look, we
need to listen to Jeremiah. We would be doing a great sin here by putting Jeremiah
to death.” The one officer who stands up for him is Ebed Melek an Ethiopian
eunuch. So foreigners who were outside the covenant actually respond more
faithfully to the word of God then the Jews do themselves. And I believe that Ebed
Melek the Ethiopian eunuch here previews and pre-figures for us an Ethiopian
eunuch in the book of Acts who is also going to respond positively to prophetic
passage and comes to Jesus and is baptized. We have another faithful Ethiopian
eunuch here in the book of Jeremiah. The promise that’s given to Ebed Melek at
the end of this in 39:5-18 after the city of Jerusalem is captured. Ebed Melek’s life
is spared and the Lord gives him a promise because of the fact that he was the one
who intervened to deliver Jeremiah from out of the cistern. “Thus says the Lord God of hosts: Behold, I will fulfill my words against this city for harm and not for good and they shall be accomplished before you on that day. But I will deliver you on that day, declares the Lord, and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you were afraid. For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have your life as a prize of war.”

So the Lord is going to deliver Jeremiah, and Baruch but the Lord is also going to deliver Ebed Melek. The same expression is used to describe the deliverance of Baruch “you will have your life as a prize of war.” Remember that kind of soldiers’ joke. Things didn’t go well in the war we didn’t bring back any plunder but at least we saved our own necks. The Lord promises Ebed Melek that the reward for his obedience to God and for taking care of the life of the prophet is that when the city of Jerusalem is captured the Lord will rescue him in the same way that he will rescue Baruch and Jeremiah.

As we look at this section of the book it is a very depressing time. There is all kinds of disobedience, all kinds of episodes where we basically know how things are going to turn out. Someone’s going to hear the word of the Lord and not respond to that in a positive way. But even in this time of national apostasy, even in this time when there’s so much resistance to the prophetic word there are these family members of Shaphan and there is Ebed Melek, there are the princes and officials who take Jeremiah’s message seriously. There is a faithful scribe by the name of Baruch. There are Rechabites who remain faithful to their family traditions. In the midst of national apostasy there is always a remnant. That remnant throughout history, in the history of God’s people, in the history of salvation the remnant is always going to be marked by the faithfulness and obedience to God’s word and to the message of God's servants.
Jeremiah 30-33: Book of Consolation, Promise of Restoration

I’m looking forward to this session to talking about Jeremiah chapters 30-33, which is referred as “The Book of Consolation,” and which helps us to see the message of hope that Jeremiah was giving to the people after this terrible judgment that he prophesized is going to take place. We have seen throughout the book of Jeremiah an incredible emphasis and a prevailing emphasis on judgment and the side of Jeremiah’s ministry that involved overthrowing, tearing down, uprooting and the reality of that Jeremiah says, “the fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until it’s accomplished all that he’s intended.” As we’ve been studying chapters 26-45 in the second major section of the book, we’ve been seeing also a very discouraging, depressing part of the book as well because it’s dealing with all of the different episodes of disobedience and failure to listen to the prophetic word, but in the midst of all of the chaos is judgment. That judgment is a message that we need to hear today as we think about the culture and the society that Jeremiah was living in, and the crisis that they were in.

In many ways it reminds us of the culture in the society that we live, in light of the moral decline, and the fact that we are drifting further and further away from God. In fact, in light of the spiritual condition of the church itself, we understand judgment is coming. Billy Graham once said that, “If God doesn’t judge America he’ll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.” So we’re not God’s chosen people in the same way that Israel was, but we realize that when our society begins to be characterized by moral breakdown and sin and injustice and all the things that were true of Judah then God’s judgment is coming to us as well.

But we also need to remember that the prophets preach restoration and salvation as well. Their message involves both judgment and salvation. In fact, at the beginning of the sessions that we were doing on Jeremiah we talked about the four-fold covenantal message that Danny Hays and Scott Duval talk about with
regard to the prophets in their book *Grasping God’s Word*. Those four aspects involve: Israel has sinned and they have broken the covenant; number two, they need to repent and turn around; the third aspect of this is that if there is no repentance, if there is no turning around then judgment will come; but the fourth aspect of that message is what we’re going to look at in this video, after God has executed judgment and carried that judgment out there is going to be restoration.

**Deuteronomy 30’s Forecast and Jeremiah’s Fulfillment**

When we go to the book of Deuteronomy as Moses is preparing the people of Israel for life in the land before they go into the promised land, there’s a passage in Deuteronomy 30:1-10 that actually gives the history of Israel before it ever happens, if we see this as a Mosaic passage. It says there that here’s what’s going to happen to Israel when they go into the land: they’re going to take possession of it, they are going to experience all the good things that God gives to them, and then they’re going to experience the curses when they turn away from God. Then God is going to drive them out of the land, send them into exile, bring those covenant curses upon them but when they are in exile and when they turn to God then God will restore them. God will circumcise their hearts, bring them back into the land and restore them, so that they will always enjoy his blessing. That’s really the message of Jeremiah as well. After this devastating judgment, after the fierce anger of the Lord has executed all that he has intended, there is a restoration. It’s encouraging to see that in this book, that focuses so much on judgment, that at the center of this book, there is a message of hope.

In chapters 26-45, which is telling us this depressing story of how Judah turned away from the Lord, they did not listen to the prophets, they experienced judgment because they did not take advantage of the opportunity to repent; they did not listen to the word of God. Even in the midst of that section, it’s contrasted by the promises of hope and future salvation, God is not going to abandon his people. As a parent there are times when my children do things that disappoint me, but there is never, even when I have to discipline them, there is never the idea that
I’m going to throw them out of my family. As a parent I love them, and that love is unconditional and un-ending. God has that same kind of love to an even greater degree for his people. It’s a comforting thing to know as we think of God’s love for his people, there is nothing that we could ever do that would cause God to love us more, but even with our sin there is nothing that we can do to that would cause God to love us less.

Restoration in Jeremiah outside The Book of Consolation (Jer 30-33)

The emphasis on restoration in the book of Jeremiah is obviously in this one section of the book, but remember that there have been brief glimpses of the hope that God has for Israel’s future, even in the very first message of the book where Jeremiah is charging the people with being an unfaithful wife to the Lord, and encouraging them to come back to him. When they do come back to him, Jeremiah 3:15-18 says here’s what God will do for his people. He says, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. And when you have multiplied and increased in the land in those days, declares the Lord, they shall no more say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all of the nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own heart. In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave to your fathers for a heritage.”

So in the future God is going to restore his people, they will never sin again, nor turn away from him in apostasy. So there will never be the need for exile, there will be a reunification of both North and South. These are the things that God is going to do for his people, and even the presence of God is going to be experienced and enjoyed by Israel in a deeper and a fuller way. There won’t be a need for an ark of the covenant and a Holy of Holies for the people to go into God’s presence in that way, because all of Jerusalem is going to be holy to the
Lord. They are going be able to know the Lord, and experience the Lord in an even deeper way.

In Jeremiah 23, we see another glimpse of the hope that God has in store for Israel’s future and this is in a passage where Jeremiah is talking about the poor leadership that Judah had in his day. In chapter 22 you had the kings of Judah whose disobedience brought judgment upon the people; God ultimately terminates, temporarily, his relationship with the line of David because everyone of them did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.

Chapter 23 says ‘Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” We realize from reading the story of the Old Testament that every one of the kings in the line of David somehow was a disappointment, even David, who was a man after God’s own heart, sins deeply. Hezekiah made mistakes, Josiah even at the end of his life makes a fatal mistake that leads to his death. All of them in some way are a disappointment. God is ultimately though going to replace the faulty leaders of the past with leaders in the future that are going to shepherd Israel in the right direction.

Chapter 23 focuses on the false prophets, but the Lord is going to raise up spiritual leaders for Israel that will be everything that God intended them to be. Here’s the promise of verse three: “Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all of the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set my shepherds over them, who will care for them and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any of them be missing, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a riotous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord is our righteousness.” So all the failures of the past and all of the judgment of the present, in Jeremiah’s time, all of that is going to be reversed and changed.
The Book of Consolation (Jer 30-33)

So the idea is touched upon at various places in the book but it becomes the primary focus in chapters 30-33. We read at the beginning of this section that God had commanded Jeremiah to write these words on a scroll. So it seems like, in their initial stage, these particular words of the prophet were on a separate scroll and had been isolated out for emphasis and to really highlight this idea, that God has a future for Israel.

Now critical scholars, as they’ve looked at the prophetic books, have often argued that the real message of the prophets was one of judgment, and that later editors or redactors came along and added words of hope to somehow bring something positive out of all of this, and that these words of hope and restoration and salvation may not have been authentic to the original prophet because it would have blunted the original word of judgment.

The problem with that idea is that there is not a single prophetic book in all of the corpus where there is not some word of salvation. I think of the book that probably the most scathing message of judgment is the book of Amos. There is very little in that book that’s positive and Amos talks about the day of the Lord and he says, “You think that it is going to be a day of light for Israel that God is going to defeat his enemies. It’s actually going to be a day of darkness. It’s going to be as if a man is running away from a lion and runs into a bear, and then if he is able to somehow escape the bear and gets into his house and leans on the wall to rest himself, and a snake is going to come out of the wall and bite his hand. They will not escape God’s judgment.” He pictures the remnant that is coming out of the judgment with only one tenth of the nation is going to survive. The remnant is going to be like a lamb that is ripped out of the mouth of a predator and all that is going to be left is a bit of an ear, a piece of a tail, a part of a leg—that’s it. But at the end of the book of Amos, even with that message of judgment, chapter 9:11-15, God is going to rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David and in the future as God blesses his people and brings them back into to the land. The hills are going to
flow with wine and there’s going to be blessing and joy and prosperity.

Jeremiah 30-33: Restoration

So if we think that the message of the prophets was exclusively judgment, we really have a problem in the prophetic corpus because there is always, in every prophetic book, some promise of salvation. In Jeremiah it happens to be highlighted in chapters 30-33. There’s an expression that occurs at the beginning and the end of this section, and a couple of times inside chapters 30-33 as well, that describes what this restoration is going to be. The Lord says that, “I will restore the fortunes of my people.” We see that in chapter 30:3 at the beginning and then chapter 33:26 at the end of this. So this promise that God is going to restore the fortunes actually provides an inclusio for The Book of Consolation. The expression is also in chapter 30:18, chapter 31:23, the Hebrew of “I will restore the fortunes of my people” is the word shuv/shuvut, so two forms of our word shuv that is so theologically important in the book of Jeremiah. God has commanded the people again and again to return to him. They have to come back to him and they have repeatedly and recurrently refused to return. So what the Lord promises to do at the end of this entire process is that the Lord is going to be the one who shuv’s and restores his people and he is going to restore their fortunes by bringing them back into the land, and do exactly what Moses had promised that God would do for Israel back in Deuteronomy chapter 30.

Prophetic Genres of Salvation

Now, in the prophetic literature, and again I think this is something that might help you as you read the prophets and get more familiar with them, this is not just in the book of Jeremiah, messages of salvation tend to be conveyed by two primary genres. There are two primary types of salvation messages that we have in the Old Testament prophets. The first one is what is referred to as “a salvation oracle.” Salvation oracle, here is the definition of that or a description of it: a salvation oracle is where God gives a promise to deliver his people out of a dangerous and desperate and sometimes a hopeless situation. That obviously is
going to be an important genre here in Jeremiah 30-33 because the exile is going to represent for the people of Israel a desperate, dangerous, and hopeless situation. Particularly what we have in a salvation oracle is that there will often be a command to fear not, don’t be afraid, something that we see recurring in the Old Testament, and then part of the oracle and a major component in it is that the oracle is going to contrast the present situation with the deliverance that the Lord is going to bring. So you’re in the midst of this difficulty and it may, from your perspective, seem to be absolutely hopeless, “but fear not I am going to deliver you, I am going to bring you out of this.” It is a promise that God is going to act and sometimes when people were in dangerous or difficult situations they would also often ask the Lord “Lord why are you sleeping? Where are you at? When are you going to intervene?” The salvation oracle is a specific promise from God that he is going to intervene in the midst of this situation.

Isaiah’s Oracles of Salvation

Now, we sometimes see salvation oracles, these “fear not” promises, being given to individuals in the prophetic books. Let’s look at a couple examples in the book of Isaiah, so this is not just something in the book of Jeremiah. It’s true of the prophets in general. The prophet Isaiah comes to King Ahaz in Isaiah chapter 7 and gives him a salvation oracle. In the midst of this Ahaz, just to remind you a little bit about him, is one of the worst kings that Judah ever had; he did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He did not trust in the Lord: he sacrificed his sons in the fire. He is one of the worst representatives of the Davidic dynasty of all times.

But in Ahaz’s day, Judah is under attack from the Syro-Ephraimic coalition. Syria and Israel are attacking Judah, and in the midst of that Isaiah comes to Ahaz and gives him a salvation oracle. Isaiah chapter 7:3 says this, “The Lord said to Isaiah, ‘Go out and meet Ahaz, you and, Shear-jashub your son at end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the Washer’s Field.’” So Judah is under attack by Israel and Syria; Jerusalem is about to be invaded by an enemy army, Ahaz is out checking the water supply to see “Are we going to be able to
survive this.” The message that Isaiah gives to him is this: “Be careful, be quiet, do not be afraid, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands” (Isa 7:4). You are worried about these two kings that are going to come into the land that have these great armies, don’t be afraid, don’t be upset about this, don’t be disturbed. God is about to snuff these guys out; they are just two smoldering stumps of fire wood. Don’t be worried about the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah, these two kings that are attacking. Don’t be afraid because Syria and Ephraim have devised evil against you saying, “let us go up to Judah.” Their attack is not going to work, rest in God’s promise. That’s a salvation oracle. They’re in a desperate situation, “Don’t be afraid, God is going to intervene.” The sad thing is that king Ahaz, because of the evilness of his heart, doesn’t believe the salvation oracle, and he tries to solve this problem on his own, and he brings disaster on Judah as a result.

Later on, Ahaz’s son Hezekiah is going to receive a salvation oracle. This is the time when, again we’ve talked about this story a number of times, Jerusalem is surrounded by the Assyrian army. Hezekiah turns to the Lord in prayer and in faith and believes that God is going to deliver him. As a result of that, Isaiah comes to him and gives him a salvation oracle, Isaiah chapter 37:6, “Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me.” So the prophet says, “Look, don’t be afraid of the threats that the Assyrians are bringing against you, and the blasphemies they’ve committed against God.” Verse 7, “Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.” Don’t be afraid. You’re in a desperate situation, I’m going to reverse that, I’m going to take care of the king who’s invaded you; I’ll protect you. The difference between Hezekiah and his father is that Hezekiah believed the “fear not” promise. When God gives a salvation oracle he wants people to respond in faith.

So, later on in the book of Isaiah, chapter 43:1-3 God is going to give a
salvation oracle to the people of Israel as a whole, to the exiles that are living in
the land, the same people that Jeremiah is focusing on. So this is a very relevant
passage to our study the book of Jeremiah. Listen to what Isaiah says to the exiles,
“But now thus says the Lord,” and this is one of my favorite passages in all the
prophets because of the promise here, “thus says the Lord, he who created you, O
Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you,’” and
now the salvation oracle, Don’t be afraid, and it pictures the salvation that is going
to happen as if it’s already taken place. “I have redeemed you, I have called you
by name, you are mine.” There is a relationship and on basis of that relationship I
am going to deliver you. And then the Lord says, “When you pass through the
waters, I will be with you; and when you go through the rivers, they will not
overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you will not be burned, and the
flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of
Israel, your Savior.”

When they take the journey back to the promised land, it doesn’t matter
what they go through, whether they have to pass through water or walk through
fire, God is going to be with them, God will get them back to the promised land,
and he will rescue them out of the desperate situation they’re in. In the book of
Isaiah, what then becomes the issue for the exiles: are they going to to respond to
this “fear not” promise in the way that Ahaz did, or in the way that Hezekiah did?

Jer 30:10-11 as a Salvation Oracle

So, in Jeremiah 30-33, Jeremiah is also going to come to the people with
some “fear not” promises and promises that are salvation oracles, where the Lord
is going to say, “I know the desperate situation that you’re in, but I’m going to
take care of you, and I’m going to rescue you.” Let’s look at chapter 30:10-11.
Chapter 30:10-11 says, “Then fear not, O Jacob, my servant, declares the Lord.”
This is the same message that we saw given to Ahaz, to Hezekiah, to the people in
the book Isaiah, that’s what Jeremiah is coming back to the exiles with as well.
“Do not be afraid. Calm yourself, O Jacob, my servant.” The reason God is going
to act and do this for Israel is because there is a special relationship that he has with these people. He’s chosen them, he’s elected them out of his free grace to be there, and that’s not going to change. “Do not be dismayed O Israel, for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with you to save you, declares the Lord. I will make a full end of all of the nations among whom I scattered you, but of you I will not make a full end.”

So there’s a desperate situation. They are in the midst of captivity; they’re in a foreign land; they have been oppressed by these enemies. God promises to step in to deliver. “I will save you” yasha, one of the important Hebrew words about salvation in the Old Testament. The Lord is going to take their present situation and reverse it. They are under judgment, by their enemies, the Lord is going to destroy their enemies and save Israel. So there’s this reversal that comes about in these salvation oracles.

That idea continues as the prophet expands upon the salvation oracle in chapter 30:12-17. What’s going to happen in the early part of this salvation oracle is that there is an extensive, detailed focus on the present desperate situation that Judah is in. In fact, as you look at Judah in exile, it looks like this is a hopeless situation. Here’s what the Lord says, “Your hurt,” verse 12, “is incurable.” You’ve been wounded. You have a disease. It’s incurable. This is a hopeless situation. “Your wound is grievous. There is none to uphold your cause, no medicine for your wound, and no healing for you.” It reminds us of earlier in the book when the people are looking for a balm in Gilead and there’s nothing there. “All your lovers have forgotten you,” talking about the nations that they’ve allied with to try to get out of this situation, “They care nothing for you; for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy, the punishment of a merciless foe, because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant. Why do you cry out over your hurt? Your pain is incurable. Because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant, I have done these things to you.” Is there anything here that seems hopeful at all? It’s
incurable, they have no medicine, they have no help, and they have been under the judgment of God.

Then, verse 16 seems to be like the hammer’s really going to fall here because the prophet says, “Therefore, [laken]” which is we’ve looked at the judgment speeches, often is introducing a sentence of judgment. It is something that God is going to do against them, and so we’re expecting, in light of verses 12-15, a verdict of judgment of guilty and here’s what I’m going to do. “Your sins are flagrant, your guilt is great. I’ve done these things to you [laken].” But then listen to what the Lord says, “All who devour you shall be devoured, and all of your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity; those who plunder you shall be plundered, and all who prey on you I will make a prey. For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, declares the Lord, because they have called you an outcast. ‘It is Zion, for whom no one cares.’” That’s a beautiful passage, because it begins by saying, “There is no healing, there is no cure, there is no hope; therefore, I’m going to destroy your enemies and I’m going to heal you and restore you.”

Tim Keller says that this passage is a beautiful illustration of God’s illogical grace, where there’s nothing in the present situation that would cause them to think there was any hope for their future, but “Therefore I will restore health to you, your wounds I will heal.” So in a salvation oracle, the promise not to be afraid, the promise that God would in some special way step into the situation, that God will rescue, redeem, save, deliver, and then as a result of that change that hopeless situation, that’s what a salvation oracle is all about.

Salvation Portrayal Genre in Isaiah

Now the other primary salvation genre in the Old Testament prophets is what’s referred to as a “salvation portrayal.” What a salvation portrayal is is again, a message of hope, it’s a promise. Sometimes telling the difference between a salvation oracle and salvation portrayal is not that easy, but what you have in a salvation portrayal is that it provides a poetic description of the
conditions that will exist in the future time of salvation, when God restores his people. So often in very exaggerated, poetic, beautiful ways this is what God’s restoration is going to be like. In the prophets, when God brings his people back from exile, this is what their lives are going to be like.

Remember in Amos, the hills are going to drip with wine, because there is going to be just incredible prosperity. So these kind of exaggerated, over the top poetic descriptions of what life will be like in the time of salvation, that’s what a salvation portrayal is. We understand, as we look at these things, that the prophets are really looking beyond simply the time when the people would come back to the land. They are ultimately looking forward to the future kingdom of God.

Now some of us might ask the question: Are they talking about the millennial kingdom or the eternal kingdom? In the prophets, I think if you were to ask Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel that question they might not know what you’re talking about; they are simply looking forward to the kingdom. They’re looking forward to this future time of restoration and salvation. They use these beautiful poetic portrayals of life, blessing, peace, and prosperity to describe for the people “this is what God is going to do for you.” Again, it’s not just Jeremiah who does this; this is characteristic of the prophetic literature as a whole.

So listen to this passage from Isaiah 11:6-9, I think we’re familiar with this one, “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together and a little child shall lead them.” So, can you imagine a little child taking along his or her pets and it involves a calf, a lion, and a leopard; and he’s petting the leopard. These are just peaceful conditions here. “The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion is going to eat straw like an ox. The nursing child will play over the hole of the cobra, [and won’t have to worry about being bit.] The weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den, [with absolute security]. They shall not hurt or destroy in all of my holy mountain.” So this beautiful, poetic description using the animal kingdom as a representation of this
describing the conditions of absolute peace and harmony that are going to exist in the future kingdom.

Now is this language literal or is it figurative? In some sense, it may be both, because the Lord is going to reverse the curse and reverse death and all of the things that are experienced in the new heavens and the new earth. But beyond that I think it is a poetic way of describing absolute harmony in the political realm, and in the human realm, in the realm of nature. It’s this great expansive promise.

There’s another promise like this. What’s the future kingdom going to look like? Isaiah portrays it this way, in Isaiah chapter 65, verse 17 says this, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth,” Again from a New Testament perspective we want to ask the question: Is this the millennial kingdom or the eternal kingdom? The prophets don’t see things that clearly, they simply see a kingdom “The former things shall not be remembered or come in to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.” So think about all the suffering and think of all the misery and the heartache and the disaster the people had experienced. When God restores it, Jerusalem is again going to become a place of joy and celebration. The Lord says, “I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.”

Now here’s an interesting verse, Isaiah 65:20, “No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die at a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.” So again we get wrapped up in questions about, “Is this the millennium or is this the eternal kingdom?” I think it is simply a poetic way of saying that the conditions of death and the effects of the curse that we see now are going to be radically altered in the future kingdom. In that time, death is going to be diminished to the point where if someone dies at a hundred years old, they’re going to be considered a child, they’re going to be considered accursed.

Now there are other places in the prophets where in this future kingdom
death is going to be completely extinguished. So those images sort of bounce against each other; we’re not always supposed to read these in hypo-literal ways, it’s simply saying the conditions, the effects of the curse are going to be reversed. Here’s what God promises to the people, “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit; they shall not build and another inhabit it; they shall not plant and another eat; and for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen one shall long enjoy the works of their hands” (Isa 65:21-22). So what happened in the exile, where an enemy came in and invaded the land and destroyed their cities and took them away? That’s never going to happen again. They are never going to build houses and not be able to live in them. They are never again going to plant vineyards and have someone else eat the fruit of it. They are going to live in the land as long as a tree exists, they are going to have long life and prosperity, that’s what a salvation portrayal looks like.

Salvation Portrayal in Jeremiah

In Jeremiah chapter 30-33, we also have these over the top elaborate, expansive promises of what the peace and the prosperity of the future kingdom is going to be like, when Israel returns to land. In Jeremiah’s day they are taken away in three waves of exile. But the promise in The Book of Consolation is that the Lord brings them back, and they are again going to enjoy this land that is flowing with milk and honey. They are going to enjoy it forever. The Lord is going to change the hearts of his people so that they will never again have to experience this kind of devastating judgment that they’ve gone through.

Let me read a couple of these in the book of Jeremiah in 30-33, we have a salvation portrayal in Jeremiah 31:11-14: “For the Lord has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the Lord.”

What you should hear there is that in the portrayal of the future conditions of the restoration in the kingdom of God, when all of this is completely fulfilled, is an absolute reversal of what the people experienced in Jeremiah’s day. They had experienced the horrors of siege and famine and pestilence and remember the picture in 2 Kings of Samaria during the time of siege, a donkey’s head is selling for 80 shekels of silver, a fourth of a liter of dove dung for 5 shekels of silver, the horrible conditions of famine and siege.

Now they are going to experience plenty. In Jeremiah’s day there is mourning and grief and one of the things that impresses me as I read through this section, that struck me as I was again studying this in preparation for these lessons, is that there is a heavy emphasis in 30-33 on the fact that exile was characterized by weeping, mourning and grief, that is going to be changed into riotous celebration. In some places the young women are playing tambourines, they’re dancing, they’re rejoicing, that’s what’s going on here. The people are singing and they’re praising God. It is an absolute reversal of things that we’ve read about in other places in the book.

Remember, in chapter 9 death is climbing through the window and the situation is so severe in the land of Judah that Jeremiah says, “We need to call for the women who are the professional mourners, and they need to come in and express the grief of our people because death has climbed through the window.” Jeremiah himself is the weeping prophet. O that my head were a fountain of tears so that I could just ceaselessly weep for my people because of what they’re going through.” All of that weeping is going to be turned in to joy.

Remember in Jeremiah’s situation one of the sign acts or one of the things that Jeremiah acted out in his own life is that God tells him in Jeremiah 16:1-4 he is not to marry, he is not to bear children, he is not to go to a place of feasting and
celebration. Well, if God were to give Jeremiah that command in the restoration, he’d have to leave Jerusalem because every place in the city is going to be a place of celebration. That deprivation, that discouragement, that grief and the famine, all those things are going to be reversed. Jeremiah 31:15, “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.” So the mother of the tribes of Israel is portrayed as grieving over the fact that her people have been destroyed, but God is going to bring them back with rejoicing, joy and celebration.

Listen to the description of the city of Jerusalem that’s given for us; the passage I want to look at here chapter 31:38-40. We have another salvation portrayal here. Thus says the Lord, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate, and the measuring line shall go out further, straight to the hill of Gareb, and shall then turn to Goah. The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be uprooted or overthrown anymore.” So, we hear those words of judgment that have characterized Jeremiah’s ministry uprooting, tearing-down but God is about to do the work of planting and restoring and rebuilding his people. The entire city of Jerusalem is going to become sacred to the Lord; it’s not just going to be the temple precincts.

Four Themes of Restoration

A number of the prophets when they talk about the future restoration there are really basically four ideas that keep constantly being repeated about the restoration. Number one: God is going to bring Israel back from exile. Number two: he is going to rebuild and restore their cities. Number three: specifically, he is going to restore the city of Jerusalem and the people will rebuild the temple. Ezekiel 40-48 gives us an elaborate description of what that future temple is going to be like. Jeremiah doesn’t really talk that much or doesn’t really mention the temple at all; he simply talks about the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. In
chapter 3 he said they are not even going to remake the ark of the convent, they are not going to need it anymore. The whole city of Jerusalem is going to be sacred to God. Remember what the city of Jerusalem was like in Jeremiah’s day. Chapter 5 they go through the city trying to find one righteous person and they can’t find it. There are these places like the Valley of Hinnom where there has been the Tophet and the sanctuaries to the pagan gods and the practice of child sacrifice. Even those places that have been filled with dead bodies, that have been contaminated, are ultimately going to become places that are sacred to God, and all of Jerusalem is going to be a place of joy and celebration. So in the promise of the prophets and the fourth promise that the prophets are going to give is that the nations will ultimately participate in the blessings of that salvation as well; and we’ll talk about that at a later session.

Jeremiah 30-33 in Relation to the Rest of the Book of Jeremiah

Now, let’s think about Jeremiah 30-33. We’ve seen salvation oracles, salvation portrayals; we’ve seen this beautiful message. Let’s think about Jeremiah 30-33 in light of the message of the book of Jeremiah as a whole and the plot of the book; the story of the book. We have definitely seen that Jeremiah does not follow a linear progression that we normally expect in a book. Even when the book is telling us basically the story of the life and ministry of Jeremiah, there are only parts of it that are chronological. There is more of this type of paneling and narrative parallelism. In spite of this sometimes confused structure, I do believe that the book of Jeremiah is basically built around a certain plot. Even though it’s a book of messages, sermons, and oracles, there is a movement going on here where there’s a problem in a resolution that’s coming about. Remember that the problem in the very first message of the book is that there is a fractured relationship between God and his people.

Specifically the images that are used there-in chapter 2, the primary one-Judah and Israel have been an unfaithful wife and they have committed prostitution. They have flagrantly committed adultery again, and again, and again
against the Lord by worshiping these other gods. The other relationship that is described there in chapter 3:19-20 is that they have been unfaithful sons. So the plot of the book of Jeremiah it’s just not about all of this random destruction, it’s not just about God venting his anger and saying, “These people have abused the covenant, I’m going to get even with them,” the purpose of all that is that ultimately God is acting to punish the sins of the past but to purge them and restore them, so that those broken relationships can be re-established. So at the beginning of the book, we have an unfaithful wife and an unfaithful son. Chapter 30-33 describe what’s going to happen at the end of the process, and Jeremiah doesn’t wait till the end of the book to give this to us. The resolution is, in chapter 30-33, God is going to restore that relationship.

Remember what it says about Judah as God’s people in Jeremiah chapter 2:20, “They are an unfaithful wife who have committed whoredom and prostitution on every hill and under every green tree. They have been like animals in heat.” Then in Jeremiah 13, as a result of that, God is going to punish his wife severely and there’s some pretty disturbing imagery to describe that that we talked about earlier. God is going to expose their nakedness, God is going to expose their shame to the nation and God is physically going to punish his unfaithful wife.

What happens in 31:21-22 is that that marriage is going to be restored, and the Lord says, “I’m going to make a new covenant with the people that will not be like the covenant I made with them when they were in Egypt, when I was a husband to them.” So this new covenant, this marriage, is finally going to work. The book of Jeremiah is about this incredible story of God working in the lives of his unfaithful people, even though they don’t listen to the prophet. Even though he has to bring this judgment, God is ultimately going to bring his people back and he is going to restore this marriage. We see an indication of this in chapter 31:21-22; here's what God says to the people: “Set up road markers for yourself; make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went.” And so God is imagining Israel put up these markers so that you can find your way
back to the promised land and I think about those Burma Shave signs that were always by the side of the road back in the old days, for an advertisement. Those signs are going to take Israel back to the promised land. And here's what the Lord says, “Return, O virgin Israel.” Now when you think about the grace that takes a woman or Israel as God's wife that was a shameless prostitute, and turns her into a beautiful and pure virgin, that’s the grace of God.

The book of Isaiah does the same thing. Chapter 1, “My faithful city has become a prostitute and it is filled with injustice and bloodshed and unfaithfulness to the Lord.” But by the end of the book, do you know what Jerusalem becomes? It becomes a joy to the Lord. It becomes like a barren woman that God takes back in marriage; he remarryes her. And, through his grace, he transforms her from this faithless prostitute into a pure and a beautiful virgin that he takes again as his wife; that's the grace of God. That's the grace of God that the Lord showed to Israel; that's the grace of God that he shows to each one of us regardless of our sin. He's able to cleanse us, to make us pure, to make us holy in his sight. That's why Jesus went to the cross to make that possible. But that's what the Lord is going to do for his people, Israel.

It says, “Return, O virgin Israel, return to your cities. How long will you waver, O faithless daughter?” That's been the characteristic of Israel and Judah throughout their history but they're going to come back to the Lord. Then it says this, “For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth:” the Lord is going to do work of new creation, “a woman encircles a man.” There is a lot of discussion about what this expression means. Some people have talked about a woman overcoming a man. Israel as this weak, exiled nation would ultimately become more powerful than her captors, and it would be like God turning a woman into a warrior. But another possibility is that the idea of encircling may convey the idea of a woman embracing a man. God does this work of new creation, where ultimately this unfaithful wife is going to love him and this relationship is going to be restored.
So you know, there's often, we've talked about feminist critics who are bothered by the feminine imagery and honestly it is disturbing in many ways. But we understand that the way that the prophet ultimately uses this metaphor is to picture something very beautiful and how God is going to restore that broken relationship. There is also a broken relationship between God and his people, like that between a father and a son. Some of us have experienced that with our own children and it's encouraging to know that even God has gone through those kinds of things when we experience that. Others of us have ministered to people that are in those situations; some of us may face that in the future regardless of our best efforts to do what we can to raise them to know and love the Lord. This is reality. This was a reality for God and his people.

In the first part of Jeremiah, they are faithless sons who will not come back to the Lord, who will not confess their sin. But listen to what it says in chapter 31:18-20. The Lord says, “I have heard Ephraim” which typically is associated with the northern kingdom, “I have heard Ephraim grieving, ‘You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf.” God’s had to discipline his people because they have been stiff-necked and rebellious and now they're grieving to the Lord. “Bring me back, return me, restore me, so that I might be restored. For you are the Lord my God. For after I had turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.” And then the Lord says, “Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord.”

We saw through the tears of Jeremiah, as the weeping prophet, he was a living embodiment of the tears of God. There have been many parents who have wept tears and shed over a broken relationship with their children. God experienced that hurt and God experienced that pain, and even as he was judging the people. He was not simply venting the fury of his anger—which is part of this,
he was also grieving over the rebellion of his son.

But what we finally see happening in this book is that all of this disaster and chaos, and even in a book that sometimes appears to be reflective of that chaos in the way it’s been put together, you almost get an idea of Jeremiah composing this in the midst of all the ruins and the devastation of this exile. Finally, Israel comes to a place where they realize their sin. Through the discipline of God, they acknowledge to God and because of the discipline of God, they acknowledge to God what they would not say during the time of Jeremiah.

Remember some of the things that the people have said to the Lord throughout the book of Jeremiah? And they have a history of saying all of the wrong things to God. In chapter 2 when the Lord confronts them with their sin and their idolatry; verse 23, “I am not unclean; I have not chased after Baals?” Chapter 2:35, “Lord what are you talking about? I am innocent. How could God possibly be angry at us?” In chapter 14, they give the Lord two confessions of sin and the words sound pretty good, but the Lord doesn't accept them because he says it’s just words and there's no real turning; they're just saying what they think I want to hear.

Chapter 18:12, they refuse to return, and remember that the Lord has given them opportunity after opportunity. Jeremiah goes to the potter, “the clay can still be shaped,” but at the end of that sign act, the people say, “It's impossible. We will not return. We will follow our own ways and act accordingly to the stubbornness of our own hearts.” This passage says that Ephraim was like an untrained calf. We even come to the end of book and the last actual chronological event in Jeremiah's ministry, the people say, “We will not listen to you and we will continue to offer our sacrifices and make our vows and carry out our offerings to the pagan gods, because we believe they are the ones who can help us.” So throughout this book, from the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry in chapter 2, to the end of Jeremiah's ministry in chapter 44, the people have said the wrong things to God; they have been a rebellious son. But in this chapter, finally in chapter 31, they will come to a
place where they repent, where they acknowledge the Lord and the broken relationship will be restored.

Jeremiah is a book that I believe we need to take seriously for two reasons: number one because of the warnings of judgment against a godless society; and we live in the midst of that. We are, I believe, on the cusp of experiencing maybe many of the things that the people in Jeremiah's day experienced. But we also need to take this book seriously, because it is a beautiful statement of God's mercy and God's grace. It's the grace we experience in personal salvation. When we come to know the Lord, when we turn from our sin, when we turn away from our idols and turn to the living God, and to what Jesus has done for us. But it's also the grace that God shows to us as his people and that we experience in our daily lives.

Jeremiah has a frightening picture of judgment, but along with that, a wonderful and a beautiful expression of God's grace, God's mercy, and the compassion that he's ultimately going to pour out on the people of Israel when he restores them.

Transcribed by Joel Whitney, Elizabeth Fjellstad, Tara Neiman, Alexa Powell, Rosanna Drinkhouse, Willens Jean-Jules and edited by Erin Cain
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Session 25
© 2013, Dr. Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt

The Book of Consolation and the Aftermath of the Exile (Jer 30-33)

Introduction

In our last section, we talked about The Book of Consolation in Jeremiah 30-33. I hope that we were able to see, in some sense, the powerful promise of restoration, the beauty of God’s grace, that after the fierce anger of the Lord has executed all of these judgments on Judah, that Jeremiah describes for us, there’s also this wonderful promise of restoration where the Lord is going to reverse the conditions of the past. Instead of exile, there’s going to be security and blessing; instead of weeping, there is going to be rejoicing; and instead of there being no healing for the wound of Judah, there is going to be perfect healing and peace. One of the most beautiful pictures of God’s grace and mercy and compassion in all of Scripture, we are going to continue looking at in this session on Jeremiah 30-33. There are some of the specific promises that are given here in The Book of Consolation.

The Book of Consolation within Jer 26-45

We are also going to place this section, or this group of chapters, within the second half of the book of Jeremiah, and chapters 26-45 and how it fits literarily into this larger segment of Scripture. Remember that that section as a whole is a story of the disobedience of Judah, the fact that they did not listen to the word of God. So how does this passage fit in as it is promising restoration that in the future the people will be able to obey the Lord will never again experience judgment? Why is it here? And how does it fit in with the rest of this particular section of the book?

In part, I think Jeremiah 30-33, owes its location in the book to the fact that the final writer and editor of this, Jeremiah, Baruch, or whoever’s responsible for the final form of the book, want to highlight and emphasize the message of judgment so it’s placed at the center; it’s placed in a prominent position. You
have judgment at the front side of the book, judgment at the back side of the book, but remember to keep focused on the thing in the middle. The ultimate resolution of the plot in the book of Jeremiah is that the Lord is going to restore the broken relationship. The unfaithful wife at the beginning of the book is going to embrace the Lord as her husband and always be faithful to him when the Lord does his final work of restoration. The unfaithful rebellious son, that according to the law of Deuteronomy would deserve death, who refuses to acknowledge his sin, who refuses to come back to the Lord, who refuses to confess, and throughout the book is saying all kinds of wrong things to God that God doesn’t want to hear, ultimately, when he repents, will say the right things, and come to know and love the Lord in the way that he’s designed.

Remember that in the second half of the book of Jeremiah, we have a Jehoiakim frame around the book that we’ve talked about, or around this particular part of the book, and we have a panel in chapters 26-35 that give us one section and show disobedience, rebellion and the fact that Judah forfeited the opportunity to repent and be spared from judgment. At the end of this, the only people who experience life are the Rechabites, this obscure group. Jeremiah 30-33 is in this first panel. And it’s reminding us that even in Jeremiah’s life of ministry, there was only one small obscure minority who experiences life and that group really has nothing to do with the long term history of the nation of Israel. There’s a promise even within this first panel with all of this disobedience and rebellion that the lord is ultimately going to restore the people of Israel and fulfill of the covenant promises made to them.

In Jeremiah’s ministry, during his life and times, the Rechabites are given a promise, they will never lack a man to stand before the Lord. But what’s really encouraging for the nation as a whole is that in Jeremiah chapter 33, The Book of Consolation, that same promise is given to David. David will never lack a man. And the Levitical priest will never lack a man to stand before the Lord. That
ultimately has huge national significance in a way that is not true of the
Rechabites.

We have a second panel in chapter 36-45. Remember that panel begins with
the cutting up of Jeremiah’s scroll. There’s the possibility in the days of
Jehoiakim, if the people will respond, if they will obey, if the leaders will turn to
the Lord then perhaps the Lord will relent before the Babylonian crisis is really
burning and on the front burner. But Jehoiakim does not turn to the Lord. The
second half of the panel is going to make the same basic statement as the first.
They forfeited the opportunity to experience national blessing, there’s the
judgment of the refugees in Egypt at the end of this section, with the only promise
of life and deliverance given to one single individual, Baruch. But what we also
have in the second panel of the Jehoiakim chapters 26-45 is that we have what
happens in Judah in the aftermath of the exile.

Jer 30-33 and Jer 40-43

After the city of Jerusalem falls in chapter 39, what events take place in the
life and ministry of Jeremiah from that point forward? Jeremiah’s ministry does
not end. The book of Jeremiah does not end with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.
Although in many ways that is the climactic event, Jeremiah’s ministry appears to
continue at least for several years after that. We have a series of events in chapters
40-43 that give us the immediate aftermath of exile. So thinking about our
Jehoiakim frame, thinking about the two panels that are in chapters 26-45, in some
ways we can see a parallel and a correspondence between Jeremiah 30-33 and
Jeremiah 40-43.

The parallel in the correspondence though, is one of extreme contrast. In
chapters 30-33 we have the promise that the Lord will restore the fortunes of
Israel, looking at the aftermath of exile and what God is ultimately going to do for
the people, the blessings that they will experience sometime in the future when
God brings about this restoration. However, what we have in chapters 40-43 is the
immediate aftermath of exile. Chapters 30-33, this is what God is ultimately
going to do, in that day, or in those last days, or in that future time. When that is going to occur is left undetermined. But what we have in chapters 40-43 is while Jeremiah is still alive. What’s going on in Judah in the immediate aftermath of exile, we have a picture of extreme contrast.

**New Exodus in Isaiah**

Chapters 30-33 and going to picture this great blessing where the people come back to the Lord, where they’re obedient to the Lord, where they experience all the blessing of living in the land, that’s not the picture of what we see in chapters 40-43. The people are devastated by the exile, the poor people are basically the ones who are left there. Instead of enjoying the blessings of the promised land, ultimately they’re going to go to Egypt. Instead of being faithful and obedient to God, they’re going to continue the disobedience that had brought about the judgment of exile in the first place. So I think part of this two panel structure in chapters 26-45, part of the purpose is to contrast that the promise is a long time after exile in chapters 30-33; with the short term realities of what Jeremiah and the people are dealing with in the immediate aftermath of exile in chapters 40-43.

**Specific Promises in Jer 30-33**

Now to set the stage for this, I want to remind us, or focus a little bit more on building off of the last lecture on what are the specific things in this future time of salvation, what are the specific promises that God gives to Israel? The first specific promise that I’d like to highlight is Jeremiah tells the people that God is going to bring them back to their land, out of exile, and they would rebuild the cities that had been destroyed by the Babylonian armies. We have a picture of this rebuilding in chapter 30 verse 18. “Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold I will restore the fortunes.’” There’s that key expression for 30-33, “‘I will restore the fortunes of the tent of Jacob and I will have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt on its mound, and the palace shall stand where it used to be. Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate. I will
multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will make them honored, and they will not be small.” The people are going to be large and numerous and one of the things that is going to cause them to rejoice is the Lord brings them back to the land. They are going to enjoy the abundance and prosperity of the land, and they are even going to be able to rebuild the cities, and the walls that have been torn down by the Babylonians.

Chapter 31 verses 38 through 40, they are going to rebuild the city of Jerusalem itself, and the entire city. All of it is going to become holy and sacred to the Lord. You have these sinful places like the Valley of Hinnom and places that have been devoted to the worship of idols that God is going to turn into a dump for dead bodies because of the exile. But Jerusalem is going to be restored and it is going to become holy to the Lord.

A second promise that I see highlighted as a theme in The Book of Consolation is that the Lord is going to perform a work of salvation that can be described as a second Exodus. So in the beginning of Israel’s history the great act of redemption in the Old Testament is the Exodus. God brings them out of bondage, God takes them out of a foreign land, and God brings them to the promise land. The pattern in God’s work of salvation is going to be a pattern throughout salvation history where the Lord does numerous acts of deliverance and the return of exile. God’s ultimate restoration of his people is going to be a second Exodus.

Now we see this in the book of Isaiah as well. Just to set the stage, in the second half of Isaiah particularly, there is a focus on the fact that the second Exodus is going to be so great that the people will even forget about the first Exodus. This deliverance is going to be something even greater than what God did when he brought the people out of Egypt. Isaiah says that it is going to be greater than something in the first Exodus for several reasons. Number one: the Lord is not going to simply bring them out of Egypt, or out of one country, the Lord is
going to bring them out of multiple places where they have been taken as prisoners and exiles.

The second thing that is going to make it a greater Exodus is that the people will not need to leave Babylon in haste, in the way that they did when they left Egypt. Remember they didn’t even allow the bread to rise. So they had to get out of there in a hurry. They will not have to do that in the second exodus.

The second Exodus is going to be greater for a third reason. The fact is that the Lord is going to transform the wilderness into an oasis, as they may pilgrimage back to the Holy Land. Remember that in the first Exodus they went into the wilderness and there was a constant struggle for food and water and they ended up eating manna for 38 years. What’s going to happen in the second Exodus is that the wilderness is going to be transformed into an oasis. There is going to be springs and water and food, and the people are going to be constantly provided for and taken care of. This is going to be even a greater deliverance than they experienced in the past.

And fourth, the second Exodus will be even greater because the Lord will bring them back to the land and they will never ever be driven out of there again. They will be able to come back to worship and serve the Lord and always be able to enjoy the abundance of the promised land. That’s Isaiah. The second Exodus is going to be so great that the first Exodus will not be remembered.

Jeremiah and the Second Exodus

In many ways Jeremiah is going to say exactly the same things. But notice some of the places we see the second Exodus motif, particularly in Jeremiah 30-33. The Lord says in chapter 31, verse 2, “The people who survived the sword [the survivors of exile] found grace in the wilderness.” So in the same way that the Lord brought the people of Israel through the wilderness in the first Exodus, the Lord is going to give grace to them as they make their journey back to the promised land. “When Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my
faithfulness to you.’” So the reason that the Lord is going to show them faith in the wilderness again is that the Lord loves them with an everlasting love and even the sin that they have committed has not caused the Lord to turn away from that.

Chapter 31, verses 8 and 9 says “Behold, I will bring them from the north country and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together; a great company they shall return here.” So the same thing that Isaiah says, the Lord is going to bring them from multiple countries. Even the lame and the crippled and the poor and the pregnant, God is going to care for all of the people and bring them back safely.

Chapter 31, verse 11, “For the Lord has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from the hands too strong for him.” So those theological terms, ransomed and redeemed that are so important to the Exodus, they can also be applied to the return from exile. Because the Lord is going to act on behalf of his family, and redeem them and bring them out of bondage and that the term “redeemed” is going to convey that.

Chapter 31:1-34 when the Lord promises the new covenant, he promises something greater than when he initially brought them out of the land of Egypt. Over in chapter 32 where Jeremiah is actually praying for the Lord to bring about the deliverance, one of the things that gives Jeremiah assurance that the Lord is going to keep his promises and do this great work on behalf of Israel and bring them back from exile is he remembers what the Lord did for his people in the past. What God has done for his people in the past is the assurance that God is going to keep his promises to the people in the future, and the ultimate act of salvation that Jeremiah focuses on in that passage: remember what the Lord did for the people of Israel when they were in bondage in Egypt. So a major theme and a major motif in The Book of Consolation is that God is going to bring about a second exodus.

Reunification of Israel
Something else that I noticed, a third prominent idea in the idea of consolation is that the Lord is going to reunify the nation of Israel when he brings them back. Now in the story of the Old Testament the division between the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, is a painful reality for a couple of hundred years. Then ultimately from 722-586 BC Judah is basically going to be alone because the Northern Kingdom is taken into captivity.

Now if we go back and we look at the reasons why that division took place, there were both political and theological reasons. The political reason is that Solomon’s son Rehoboam was an idiot, and made a very foolish political decision that led to a political fracture. But the theological reason was that God was punishing the apostasy of Solomon. He did not completely take away the kingdom that belonged to David, but he did greatly diminish it. That painful reality of the division between the North and the South is going to be completely healed when the Lord brings his people back in the future.

Chapter 31, verses 27-28 say this, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and with the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck them up and break down, to overthrow and to destroy,” there are the words, those verbs, that are descriptive of Jeremiah’s ministry through judgment,” and bring them harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant.” The promises are given to both Israel and Judah. When God makes the new covenant, “I will make a new covenant with both Israel and Judah,” the tribes are going to be joined together and they are going to experience this as the unified people.

One of the things you notice as you read the references to Israel and Jeremiah 30-33, the names that are going to be used are Jacob, or Ephraim, or things that are typically associated more with the Northern Kingdom. That division is not going to exist in the future kingdom.

A New David
Then fourthly is something that is hugely important, light of the covenant promises that God had made to Israel in The Book of Consolation, are promises that the Lord is going to raise up for Israel a new David. In Jeremiah’s life the house of David had become so corrupt that the Lord is going to take them off the throne. The promise in Jeremiah, and this is true in many of the prophetic books, is that there is going to be an ideal Davidic ruler in the future. Now from their Old Testament perspective they might not have understood that that is Jesus the Messiah. But they saw a restoration of the dynasty itself. They saw that there was going to be an ideal Davidic ruler in the future who is going to be everything that God designed the Davidic king to be. When we get to the New Testament, Jesus is the fulfillment of that. Jesus becomes even a greater expression than maybe the Old Testament prophets could have envisioned. Jesus is not just a son of David, he is also God himself. Jesus is not going to just be the ideal Davidic ruler; he is going to be the King who rules forever. He’s not just going to reign from the throne in Jerusalem; he reins literally from the right hand of God the Father. But there is a promise in the book of Jeremiah and throughout the Old Testament prophets that God is going to restore the line of David.

We see this in The Book of Consolation in actually three specific places. Chapter 30 verses 8-9. “It shall come to pass in that day, declares the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off your neck and I will burst your bonds, and foreigners shall no more make a servant of him.” So here’s the reversal of what Jeremiah had talked about when he was wearing the yoke around Jerusalem and said you’re going to be in subjugation and bondage to Nebuchadnezzar. Now Hananiah the false prophet had tried to counter that message by smashing the yoke and really was offering an empty message of peace to the people. But the real hope is that one day, in God’s timing, the yoke of bondage to Babylon would be broken and instead of being under that yoke of bondage, foreigners would no longer make a servant of Israel, but as verse 9 says, “But they shall serve the Lord their God,
and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.’ Ultimately we know the fulfillment of that is Jesus.

Chapter 30, verse 21 is a promise about the future ruler of Israel. It says in that passage, “Their prince shall be one of themselves; their ruler should come out of their midst; I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me, for who would dare of himself to approach me? declares the Lord.” So there’s not a specific connection to David here but he is going to be an Israelite and he is going to have the privilege of being allowed to enter the presence of God. That ultimately is fulfilled in Jesus as Messiah.

In chapter 33 verses 15-16, repeating a promise that’s given to us for the first time in Jeremiah back in chapter 23, and here’s the description of the future Davidic ruler. “In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Zedekiah, as the final king in the Davidic line, his name was “the Lord is my righteousness.” He did not exactly live up to his name. But there is going to be a righteous branch in the future who will live up to that name and who will be everything that God designed the house of David to be. Again Jesus as Messiah is the one who is going to fulfill that.

New Covenant

So those are some of the basic promises that go along with this theme: bring them back to the land; rebuild their cities; a second Exodus; a reunification of the North and the South; a new covenant where God would transform Israel so that they will obey him; and a new David. In this promise of the New Covenant that’s given in chapter 31 verses 31 and 34, remember what it says there, “God is going to write the law on the hearts of his people. They will have the internal desire to obey him.” So what’s going to happen? Is this is going to break that cycle and history of disobedience that we see for hundreds and hundreds of years in the Old Testament? How do things go as Israel is living in the land in the time of Old Testament history? How do things go as far as being loyal to the Lord and faithful
to his commandments? Very poorly.

But what the Lord is going to do is he is going to transform the hearts of his people. He’s going to give them a new heart so that they will obey him, and here’s the possibility, here’s what’s going to come about as a result of this. Jeremiah 32:39-40, “They will be my people. I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way that they may fear me forever.” One of the problems with Jehoiakim earlier in the book, the reason that he didn’t listen to God when he gave the warnings through scroll was he didn’t fear the Lord. And he just cut the scroll up and said, I don’t care what God says. The people in the future and their leaders are going to have a fear for God that will enable them to obey. “That they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts.” So permanently they will enjoy God’s blessing. There will never ever again be an exile because there’s not going to be a need for exile because they will be permanently loyal, faithful, and obedient to God.

So those are the basic promises of The Book of Restoration chapters 30-33. Our response and our reaction to this is, “This is great! When do we get there?” You can imagine as we turn to Jeremiah 40-43. Remember the fall of the city in chapter 39. “How long is it going to be until we experience the blessings of salvation?” Remember Jeremiah had said the exile is going to last for 70 years. What we see in chapters 40-43, and sometimes in some very clear contrasts being set up by the Book of Consolation, it looks like there is a possible restoration that begins, but the disappointing thing is that really the fall of Jerusalem is not the end of judgment. You would think, “Well maybe the people have finally learned their lesson. The city has fallen. Many of them have been taken away. All that’s left is the poor and the land. That got their attention and they turned back to God.” But what we see are the conditions judgment and disobedience are going to continue and there is a huge contrast between the blessings that are promised in chapters
30-33, and the reality that is being lived out in chapters 40-43.

Gedaliah (Jer 40)

Remember that key promise, the Lord is going to transform Israel when he establishes a new covenant so that they will always do what? So that they will always be able to obey him and follow him and they will turn away. They’ll never have to be punished for their sin again. So it looks like as we get into Jeremiah 40 Gedaliah is appointed governor. There’s not a king on the throne, but Gedaliah from the family of Shaphan that’s been a supporter of Jeremiah all throughout his ministry. He becomes the governor of Judea and it looks like we begin to see kind of a minor return. We almost wonder, “This looks like the incipient form at least of Jeremiah 30-33. Listen to what it says in Jeremiah 40 verse 9. “Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, swore to them and to their men saying, ‘Do not be afraid to serve the Caldeans. Dwell in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it will be well for you.’”

This is the same thing Jeremiah’s taught and Jeremiah sort of disappears here in chapters 40 and 41, and Gedaliah takes his place. He says, “Look, if you serve the Babylonians things will go well for you, you will be prosperous, you will be successful.” He says in verse 10 “As for me, I will dwell at Mizpah, to represent you before the Caldeans who will come to us. But as for you, gather wine and summer fruits and oil and store them in your vessels, and dwell in your cities that you have taken.” In an incipient way the abundance, the blessing, the prosperity of the restoration in chapters 30-33, Gedaliah wants them to enjoy that and to experience that even though this is just in the short time right after the fall of Jerusalem has taken place. Is this the beginning of the restoration described in chapters 30-33? I think that’s kind of where the narrator is taking us.

But the reality is that this section from chapters 40-43, instead of it being characterized by the law of God written on the hearts of the people, there are going to be two specific acts of disobedience to God. In the same way that the people were disobeying God before the fall of Jerusalem, they’re just as disobedient to the
word of God and especially to the prophetic word of Jeremiah afterwards. So this can’t be the restoration. The law of God definitely at this point has not been written on the hearts of the people because they’re still doing the same things that brought the judgment in the first place.

**Assassination of Gedaliah**

In the first act of disobedience is that Gedaliah, the governor that has been appointed by Nebuchadnezzar. Remember God has given authority to Nebuchadnezzar, so God is the one who appointed Gedaliah. Gedaliah is assassinated. In chapter 40 verse 9 Gedaliah as sort of the replacement for Jeremiah in that section says, “Submit to Babylon and if you will put yourself under Babylonian hegemony, recognize that God has given authority to the Babylonians at this point, things will go well for you.” So we hear the same thing. Gedaliah is basically saying the same thing that Jeremiah had been saying to Zedekiah in the days right before the fall of Jerusalem. “Submit to Babylon, put yourself under their yoke, if you will surrender and submit to Babylon, and recognize that they’re the authority that God has put in place here things will go well for you and your life will be spared.” Zedekiah didn’t listen to the word of God and experienced judgment as a result of that.

Gedaliah says submit to Babylon and things will go well for you. It looks like at the beginning that’s what they are going to experience. He tells them, “Harvest the fruits. Bring in the crops. The Lord’s blessing us.” And we even begin to see refugees and exiles returning to the land.

Chapter 40, verse 11, “Likewise, when all the Judeans who were in Moab and among the Ammonites and in Edom and in the other lands heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah and had appointed Gedeliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, as governor over them, then all the Judeans returned from those places.” So what had chapters 30 to 33 promised? That the Lord was going to bring them back to the land. This is all going on and this is the beginning.

But all of this changes in chapter 41 when Gedeliah is assassinated by a
man named Ishmael. The ironic thing is that Ishmael is from the house of David. And so this insipient blessing, that if you’ll submit to Babylon and obey, things will go well, there is a direct act of disobedience by the assassination. The law of God has not been written or their hearts. They are still rebellious against God, God’s plan and God’s design.

Flight to Egypt

The second act of disobedience is that in chapters 42 to 43. Here we have the story of a military contingent, led by a man named Johanan, coming to Jeremiah and they are asking the prophet what they should do in the aftermath of this assassination. The Babylonians respond to the fact that this insurgent group has put to death the governor that they have appointed, they are going to come back and wreak more havoc on the land. They are going to find out that, “We couldn’t trust Judah any more than before we destroyed the city of Jerusalem. We’ve still got problems with them and so we are going to have to deal with this.” So their plan, the plan of Johanan and his group, is that they are going to flee to Egypt. By leaving the promised land, they feel that will give them security. They are going to be able to flee from Babylonian reprisals for the assassination of Gedaliah.

So they come to Jeremiah, and in chapter 42 there are a couple of interesting things. They say, “Pray for us and tell us what we should do, and whatever the Lord tells you that we should do, we’ll do that. We’ll be obedient to it.” So they express a willingness to follow the Lord. Again, is this the beginning of 30 to 33? Maybe because they have the desire to follow and obey God. Jeremiah says “I will pray for you.” Ironic, in light of the fact that the prophet is no longer under this edict from God where he’s not allowed to pray for the people, he agrees to intercede for them. They can experience blessing here. He says, “I’ll come bring back to you a word from the Lord. What does God want you to do?” When Jeremiah comes back to them, however, he says, “Here is what the Lord told me, ‘Stay in the land. Don’t worry about going down to Egypt. You’re not
going to be any more secure there than you are trusting God and doing what God told you to do. Submit to Babylon and things will go well for you.’”

If you remember what happens there, Johanan and his party, they refuse to do what Jeremiah asks. They say initially, “We’ll do whatever the Lord says.” And then, as soon as the Lord gives them a message through the prophet, they disobey and they turn away, and they react in the same way that the people did before the fall of Jerusalem. “Jeremiah you’re telling us a lie. You’re telling us to submit to Babylon because you and Baruch are traitors, and you’re trying to sell us out to the Babylonians.” It tells us in chapter 43, verses 1-7, “They entered Egypt in disobedience to the word of the Lord and they took Jeremiah and Baruch with them.”

So we have a definite contrast between 30 and 33 and 40 and 43. In 30 to 33, God says, “I’m going to write the law on the hearts of my people. They will obey me. They will follow me. They will always do what I tell them to do.” Chapters 40 to 43, what we see going on there is there are two specific acts of disobedience against God. Even though God was prepared to bless them, and even though God had prepared a way for them to be blessed, they are going to forfeit that blessing because the same disobedience that characterized the people before the fall of Jerusalem is true of the people post-586 BC as well. Two specific acts of disobedience, the assassination of Gedaliah, chapter 41, and the flight of Johanan and the Jews to Egypt in chapter 43. So we are still in the same hopeless situation that we saw before the judgment of 586 BC takes place.

New Exodus Motif Reversed

Now the second thing that provides a pretty obvious contrast between 30 to 33 and 40 to 43 is that, remember one of the motifs describing the salvation is that God is going to do a new Exodus. God is going to bring back a second exodus and a deliverance, where he brings the people out of captivity that’s going to be even greater than the first one. Basically, what we have in chapters 40 to 43, however, is that we see a reversal of the Exodus. Because, instead, the people start coming
back to the land in chapter 40 under the rule of Gedaliah, but in 43:1-7, what do Johanan and his party do? They go back to Egypt.

Jeremiah, from what we can tell, concludes and finishes his ministry in Egypt outside of the land as a second Moses. Jeremiah lives through, in some sense, the reversal of the Exodus. Deuteronomy 28 verse 68 says that one of the covenant curses that God would bring about on his people if they disobeyed him is that he would put them on ships and he would send them back to Egypt. Literally, in Jeremiah’ life he doesn’t get on the ship but he does end up being sent back to Egypt. We have the reversal of salvation history. Within the context of the Jeremiah 26 to 45 we have the exact opposite of what is promised in The Book of Consolation. Chapters 30 to 33 give us a promise of new Exodus. Chapters 40 to 43 depict for us the reality of no exodus. So there is a very obvious contrast here.

New David?

Then finally, something that I want to develop in a little more detail is that, remember The Book of Consolation had said that God is going to raise up a new David for Israel and the people are going to serve David their king. They’re not going to serve the foreign oppressors anymore. The Lord is going to raise up a righteous Branch. And so, the covenant promises that God has made to the house of Israel are going to be fulfilled. God is going to keep his covenant with David, and the Lord is going to raise up a new David. But I want to remind us of the representative of the house of David that we have in chapters 40 to 43. His name is Ishmael. Ishmael is a member of the royal family who ultimately assassinates Gedaliah and really brings about more judgment. So in chapters 30 to 33 we are looking forward to a new David who is going to be a righteous branch and will lead the people in the right direction.

In chapters 40 to 43 what we really have in the immediate aftermath of exile is we have another Davidite who is just like the ones that God had brought judgment against. A scholar by the name of Applegate says that, “The actions of Ishmael when he assassinates Gedaliah complete the picture of the house of
David’s inimical opposition of Yaweh’s purposes in both Babylonian supremacy and Judean restoration.” So instead of the house of David facilitating restoration and instead of the house of David bringing blessing to the people, the house of David is going to bring more judgment, more bondage, more violence, more disaster, and we definitely are not in a situation where the Lord is going to raise up a righteous Branch.

In the immediate aftermath of exile, the key representative of the house of David is just as corrupt as the last kings of Judah, that we read about in Jeremiah 22. Men like Jehoiakim that did not listen to the Lord, men like Zedekiah that did not pay attention to the command to submit to Babylon. I believe that Ishmael acts to bring about the assassination of Gedaliah. This is his failed attempt, to restore what God would ultimately have to bring about. He wants to bring the house of David back into power. That is only going to happen when it’s done God’s way.

Gedaliah/Ishmael and Saul/David

As I’ve studied the Old Testament I come to just deeply appreciate the beauty, the artistry, and the sophistication of the stories. One of the things that impresses me with chapter 40 to 43, in some ways, this is kind of an incidental footnote in the history of the Old Testament. Lots of people who may know the Bible really well, or have read the Old Testament for many years, they don’t necessarily know about Ishmael and Gedaliah. But what the narrator does here is that, in several interesting ways, the narrator is going to portray the story of Ishmael and Gedaliah in light of the better known story of Saul and David.

Remember what happens with Saul and David? Saul is God’s anointed ruler who is replaced by David, and these promises are given to the house of David that they will rule forever. We have a change of dynasty from Saul to David. Remember what’s happened in Jeremiah’s ministry is that we have a change of administration. The house of David has been God’s vice regent. They have been the soul of the Lord who executed God’s rule on earth.
In Jeremiah’s ministry, that role of supremacy, that role of hegemony, that role of rulership, being God’s representative has been given to Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar is now God’s servant and God’s anointed ruler. So when we read in chapter 40 verses 5, 7, 11 and 41:2 and 41:10 that Gedaliah as governor was appointed by Nebuchadnezzar, Gedaliah is God’s appointed ruler. So there has been a change of administration in the same way there was in the days of Saul and David. So it’s natural that the narrator would go back to that story and present the change that is taking place in Jeremiah’s day.

Here is the interesting part though, it is Gedaliah in this story who becomes the new David. And ironically it is Ishmael, as a member of the house of David, who acts in ways that remind us of Saul. Let’s think about some of the parallels. How specifically do chapters 40 and 41 remind us of the story of David and Saul? Remember that when Gedaliah becomes the governor it tells us that the Jews and the Israelite refugees in places like Mohab, Ammon, and Edom begin to come back to the land. Those are the places that when David becomes king, he begins to establish his authority and begins to subjugate them and establishes his kingdom over them. It tells us in chapter 40, verse 8, the Gedaliah who is this new David is anointed at Mizpah. Very interesting, because that is the place back in 1 Samuel 10 where Saul is first anointed as king. Now Ishmael is carrying out this conspiracy, conspiring to put Gedaliah to death. He seems to be inspired in some way by the support of Baalis, who is the king of the Ammonites, and ultimately when Ishmael has to run away from Judah and flee he is going to go to the Ammonites. 2 Samuel chapter 10 verses 1 and 3 is going to remind us that in the early days of his kingdom, David had close ties with the Ammonites.

So there are shared places, names, and geography. We’re already hearing some of the echoes of Saul and the David story. There are some other things that develop this a little bit further. Let me just mention a couple. Gedaliah before he is put to death hears news that there is a conspiracy on the part of Ishmael. Gedaliah refuses to act on that, and in some way I’m reminded of the fact that David was
involved in this huge conflict with Saul. Remember, David running and fleeing from Saul, yet he has opportunities to take Saul’s life, but he refuses to do so. In some way Gedaliah refuses to act against Ishmael. But in this particular story it’s Ishmael that has no problem stretching out his hand and doing violence to the Lord’s anointed. David as a man of honor would not touch the Lord’s anointed. He would not touch Saul when he had the opportunity. Ishmael is nothing like David. Because the Lord has appointed Gedaliah and Ishmael puts him to death.

Now Ishmael after he assassinates Gedeliah, he is not finished with his violence. Because it tells us in chapters 41 verse 9 that he additionally murdered 70 pilgrims who had come from the north, apparently to worship the Lord and to offer support to Gedaliah. He actually tricks them and deceives them and tells them that he will take them to Gedaliah. In light of what happened to Gedaliah it’s ironic that he said that. He murders them, he throws their bodies in the well, and it seems the only reasons he does this is that he believes they are supporters of Gedeliah. The heinous violent murder of people that have come to worship the Lord might in some way remind us of the fact that, in his conflict with David, Saul had murdered 85 priests that he believed were conspiring against him.

Finally, Ishmael, the last thing we begin to see about him, is that Ishmael is going to take action to try to get away and escape after he has committed this heinous crime. It tells us in chapter 41:10 that he takes hostages and captives, and it includes the king’s daughters, and he is going to run and flee to Ammon. One of the last events we read about before the death of Saul is that David has family members kidnapped and David has to go and rescue them. But now it’s a member of the house of David who has done the kidnapping and has taken away wives and family members of other people. It is Johanan and the military officers who have to go capture this member of the house of David who is about to lead his people into exile. Ishmael as a Davidite is not bringing about restoration, but in fact he taking away people into exile. He looks more like a Nebuchadnezzar than a David.
So all of these things, I think, are showing us that the house of David is still in big trouble. The only representative in the line of David during this time in the aftermath of 41 to 43 is not the righteous Branch that God has promised for the future. It’s a guy who is bad news. The place where Johanan and military officers are going to rescue Ishmael’s kidnapped victims are at the pool of Gibeon. Again, going back to the story of David and Saul in 2 Samuel chapter 2, this is the place where Abner and Joab decide to have 12 representatives of the men of David and 12 representatives of the men of Saul fight. The men were killed, and then ultimately David’s men defeat Saul and Saul and his men have to flee out of the country. But now in this passage, it is a defeat at the pool of Gideon, for a member of the house of David. So we see that the house of David, the people of Judah, are still under a sentence of judgment, and that the promise of restoration that God has given to his people are not going to be experienced in the near future.

Rejection of the Word of God Continues

The pattern of sin and of people not listening to the word of the Lord that we have seen throughout Jeremiah’s ministry is going to continue even after the fall of Jerusalem. The people really haven’t learned their lesson. All of this becomes a huge lesson for the people in exile, because the people in Babylonian exile, they have been given the promise that ultimately, they are the good figs that the Lord will restore and bring them back to the land. But what this is reminding them of is that promise is not an automatic guarantee. Jeremiah 29 verse 11 to verse 14 says, the Lord will restore them when they turn to the Lord and they seek them with all their hearts. So the Lord has given a promise of restoration to the exiles that are in Babylon, but it’s not an automatic thing. They will have to turn to God, and when they turn to God, and when they are obedient to God, and when they humble themselves and repent of their past, that’s when they will be blessed. The people who lived in the land in the immediate aftermath of exile did not experience the blessing that God had for them, because there were two gigantic
acts of disobedience that were continued from the past and that continued to reflect the house of David and their opposition to God.

Contrast Jer 30-33 and Jer 40-43

Let me mention one more important parallelism as we’re looking at Jeremiah 26 to 45 and thinking specifically about the contrast between restoration in 30 to 33 and the judgment that’s occurring in chapters 40 to 43. We’ve seen that various types of narrative parallelism are very important to the way that the narrator tells the story of the people’s continued disobedience to the word of the Lord. One of the other types of parallelism that is going to continue to make this point of their recurring and repeated sin is that in specific ways, the narrator is going to describe sins that occur in chapters 40 to 43 in ways that very directly remind us of acts of disobedience before the fall of Jerusalem at other places in the Jeremiah narratives. First of all, let’s think about this. In chapter 26, Jehoiakim kills the prophet Uriah with a sword. In chapter 41, it is Ishmael, as a member of the house of David who kills with a sword and executes Gedaliah. When Jehoiakim commits this terrible murder by killing a prophet, it says that he dumps his body in a common burial place. When Ishmael kills the seventy men who have come to worship from the northern kingdom, it’s just a heinous, treacherous act. He dumps their bodies in a well, or a cistern. In chapter 38, when the military officials did not like the fact that Jeremiah was discouraging the war effort, they threw him in a well, a cistern, the Hebrew word bor. Ishmael dumps the seventy bodies into a cistern, a bor.

Chapter 41 verse 7, in the days immediately before the fall of Jerusalem, Zedekiah turned to Egypt for help and he believed that if Egypt could get involved in all of this, maybe it would relieve the pressure and maybe the Babylonians would go away. That didn’t work. Jeremiah said “Look, even if all that’s left of the Egyptians are some wounded soldiers, they would still be able to defeat you.” In the aftermath of exile in chapters 42 and 43, Johanan and his officers go down to Egypt because they believe that Egypt is their source of security. It didn’t work.
for Zedekiah and it didn’t work for Johanan. When the military officers, in
Jeremiah 38, reject his message of surrender to Babylon, their claim is Jeremiah is
a traitor. He’s defecting over to the Babylonians. He’s weakening the war effort.
When Johanan and the military officers hear Jeremiah’s advice that they are to
stay in the land, and submit to the king of Babylon, they say, “You’re a liar.” They
accuse him of sheker. The same thing that Jeremiah has said about the message of
the false prophets, and they go along, and they add to that. They say that, “You’re
telling us to stay here because Baruch,” now they’re blaming Baruch, “Baruch is
trying to sell us out to the Babylonians.”

So what we see throughout the Old Testament is a frustrating history of
continued disobedience to the Lord. What we see in the book of Jeremiah is a
frustrating history of disobedience before the fall of Jerusalem. The people did not
listen to the word of the Lord. After the fall of Jerusalem, the people did not listen
to the word of the Lord. They continue to commit the same sins. So we end up in
Jeremiah 26 to 45 with a powerful contrast. The hope of the restoration is that will
occur in those days, and the reality of what is happening in the immediate
aftermath of exile. Again, the issue is going to be response to the word of the
Lord. The Lord has promised that there will be restoration. The Lord has promised
that there will be blessing for Israel. The Lord has promised that the exiles are the
ones who are the good figs. “And I know the plans that I have for you, the plans to
give you a hope and a future.” But the history of how this is going to work out is
going to be very complicated and complex. They will not experience this
deliverance until they seek the Lord and turn to him with a whole heart.

One writer, writing on the book of Jeremiah, comments on the theological
idea of the unending exile. Jeremiah prophesied that the return to the land would
occur in seventy years. But we get the idea as we read this that the actual
restoration of Israel, what’s envisioned in chapters 30 to 33, may not happen until
a long time after that as well.

We come to Daniel chapter 9, and I’ll close with this as a final reflection on
this section. In Daniel chapter 9, Daniel as the days of captivity are drawing to an end, reads the prophecies of Jeremiah that the exile would last for seventy years. He knows that the time of their return is at hand, and so he begins to pray that God would fulfill his covenant promises. He doesn’t take it as an immediate guarantee that this is automatically going to happen no matter what. It will happen when we seek God, when we turn to him.

He confesses the sins of the people and prays for God to fulfill his promise. But in response to that prayer, God gives him another vision. God elaborates further on the timing of the restoration. And he says, “Daniel, seventy weeks of seven years are decreed for Israel.” They will come back to the land in seventy years. But the time where God is going to fully restore them, where God is going to put an end to transgression and renew the covenant with his people, that will not occur until a distant time in the future. Israel would not experience the blessings of salvation until they sought God with all of their heart. We can see that in Jeremiah itself. It’s not just a foreign idea imposed upon us in Daniel. We see that in the contrast that is laid out in the book of Jeremiah, the promises of chapters 30 to 33, and the reality of what is going on in the days after the exile in chapters 40 to 43.
Introduction

Our focus on this segment is going to be on Jeremiah’s promise of the new covenant and as we were looking at Jeremiah’s promise of restoration I think we understand the central importance of this passage. Really central to Jeremiah 30 to 33 in the sense that this new covenant is how God is going to bring about this restoration and salvation. What is God going to do in the restoration of his people that will break this pattern of centuries and centuries of rebellion? How is God going to heal this broken marriage? How is God going to restore the relationship with his unfaithful son? The new covenant is central to that. For us as Christians the new covenant is important because it bridges, in many ways, the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Old Testament gives us the promise of the new covenant, the New Testament gives us the fulfillment of the new covenant. I would lose my credentials as a Christian if I didn’t spend some time focusing on the new covenant.

Review of Covenant History

I’m going to begin by reading the passage and then we’re going to look specifically at what are the promises and what is this new covenant all about. Before we even read the passage though, remember the context of the covenant history of God and his people throughout the Old Testament. Salvation history in the Old Testament is built around a series of covenants that God establishes with people trying to bring humanity back into a right relationship with him. The relationship was fragmented when Adam and Eve sinned and rebelled against God. They were given a position where they were God’s vice-regents. They were God’s image on earth. They were to reflect his glory and his honor. They were to in some sense to spread the Garden of Eden through the earth so that all of
humanity can experience God’s blessing. When they rebelled against that, God like an ancient Near Eastern king is going to implement his rule through a series of covenants. The first covenant with Noah was the promise not to destroy the earth again but the responsibility with that was whoever sheds man’s blood by man shall his blood be shed.

After the rebellion at the tower of Babel, God is going to make a covenant with Abraham. He is going to promise him land, many descendants, and he will now become the instrument of blessing that God originally gave to Adam. This covenant is going to establish Abraham’s descendants as the people of God.

The Mosaic Covenant is going to establish for those people how to live as God’s people. They are going to be blessed if they obey the covenant; they are going to be cursed if they disobey. The history of the Old Testament and the ministry of Jeremiah is the culmination of this. They experience the covenants curses because they do not obey God’s commandments.

God gave them a king and made a covenant with the house of David. The Davidic covenant that promised that David’s family would rule forever established David’s throne and rulership over the land that ultimately David and his sons as God’s vice-regent would rule over the entire earth. But the obligation that was placed upon them is that each Davidic king within that line would be blessed or punished based on his obedience or disobedience to God.

There’s a connection between each of the covenants as they emerge in God’s plan with the covenants that had already come before. The Davidic king would enable them to possess the land and be free from their enemies but the Davidic king also had a responsibility if they wanted to keep that land to obey the Lord. What Jeremiah witnesses is the culmination of the failures of the house of David. The judgment that is going to come upon them so God has made these series of covenants: the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the Davidic covenant. But they’re still working out of salvation history. There’s this long pattern of disobedience. The new covenant is ultimately
going to be the solution for that and also how God is going to bring about his
glorious restoration that’s described for us in The Book of Consolation.

The New Covenant Text (Jer 31:31ff)

Here’s the passage Jeremiah 31:31ff: “Behold, the days are coming,
declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and
the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with your fathers on the day
when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant
that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the
covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the
Lord:  I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will
be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his
neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know
me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive
their iniquity, and I will remember their sin and more.”

So in this session we’re going to focus specifically on this passage and the
promises that are given here; the specific promises and really how this flushes
itself out, as well as some other parts of the Old Testament. The first thing to
stand out to me as I’m looking at this that in verse 31 is that the Lord says the
Covenant that I’m going to make this new covenant, it will not be like the one that
I made with your forefathers on the day that I brought them out of the land of
Egypt. So what’s central to this new covenant and what’s going to give it the
power to ultimately do what the first covenant cannot is that there is going to be an
act of salvation that would transcend the Exodus. We talked about this new
Exodus in the last session. Remember Isaiah saying that the second exodus will
be greater than the first and that, number one, the Lord’s going to bring them out
of many nations. Number two, they will not have to leave the land of Babylon in
haste the way that they did with Egypt. Number three, the Lord’s going to
transform the wilderness into an oasis. There’s going to be an easier journey back
to the land. Number four, they will come back to the land to worship the Lord and
they will never again be taken away from it. So there is an act of salvation that’s going to transcend the first exodus. It stands out here. This is not going to be a covenant like the one in my love, in my grace, in my mercy, and compassion, when I rescued your fathers out Egypt. It’s not going to be like that.

In fact, it is going to be something even greater than that and it is going to be an act of salvation through this new exodus and this larger salvation is what the Lord is going to bring them. This will be the thing that makes it finely stick.

The relationship will work the way that God has designed it and Jeremiah over in chapter 23 verses 7 and 8 also is giving a promise of restoration. It is looking for a second exodus greater than the first one. He says, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of Egypt but as the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Egypt, the house of Israel out of the north country.” So the paradigmatic act in salvation throughout the history of the Old Testament has been the Exodus. But this deliverance is going to be so great that they’re really not going to even reference it anymore. This is going to be a greater act of salvation.

So I think what we have going on in the history of salvation throughout the Bible is that you have a pattern of where God rescues and delivers people. That’s what salvation is about. God rescues the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. In the new covenant God is going to rescue them out of the bondage of captivity. Jesus comes to bring redemption out of the captivity of sin. You have this recurring pattern. The way that God saves in the past is true of the way that God saves in the present and the way that he will save in the future. God is a God who rescues but what G.K. Beale has also emphasized about salvation history in his New Testament Theology is that salvation can also be understood as the series of acts of deliverance and new creation where God is constantly doing a greater work in each aspect of the moving forward of salvation history. So there are these series of new creation acts where God is ultimately bringing fallen humanity or his
people back to himself and with each act of new creation, with each act of deliverance, God is doing a more powerful work that will ultimately bring us to the place where God’s kingdom will be fully restored. Man will be living in right relationship with the Lord and there will never again be the need for judgment because God’s going to do away with sin.

Let’s just think about how salvation history works in this way. Adam sinned and rebels and so God is going to raise up a new Adam, Noah. He says to Noah be fruitful and multiply. He gives to Noah the same position that he gave to Adam and there is a rescue and deliverance. There is a new creation when God restores Noah after the destruction of the flood. Another new Adam in the story of Abraham and just as Adam was given the position in the garden as a priest Abraham’s descendants kings will come forth from you and they will be a kingdom of priests, they will restore to that a dominion position. Then the Lord will do this act of new creation where he brings them out of captivity in Egypt. The Lord will raise of up new Adams with David and Solomon and they are going to help the people of Israel to experience fully the kingdom of God to possess the land that God promised them to remove the enemies that where there to enjoy the presence of God through the temple in a permanent sanctuary. So they are new Adams and acts of new creation are happening there but after the captivity occurs this new creation this new exodus is going to be greater than anything that God has done for his people in the past. Then finally as we move into the New Testament the deliverance that Christ brings in the new covenant being implemented in its initial stages and then in his second coming new creation will bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

So God constantly throughout the Bible there is a story line where God is consistently and persistently rescuing and delivering people. That is what God does in his mercy and grace he is bringing people out of their bondage to sin. He is raising up new Adams that will implement his kingship on earth and ultimately that is bringing us to a new heaven and a new earth where this new covenant will
be experienced in a full way. So the first thing that this passage is promising is that the Lord did something for Israel in the past. They cried out to God in their bondage and from the perspective of what Israel in the exodus looks like there is no deliverance for them Egypt is the most powerful nation on earth at this time. How are they ever going to get out of bondage? The Lord delivers them and in an incredible act of mercy and grace. He raises up a deliverer for them in Moses; he carries out the plagues; and he carries out the deliverance at the Red Sea. The Lord says the new covenant it’s not going to be “like the one that I made when I brought your fathers out of Egypt. It’s going to be a greater demonstration of my love, my grace, and my mercy.” Finally, this is what it’s going to take for the salvation to stick, the Lord made himself Israel’s husband in this previous act of deliverance but in the future act of deliverance through this great act of salvation the Lord is ultimately going to guarantee the fidelity of his wife. Israel will become a faithful covenant partner that’s the beginning part of this.

I’d like to go to the end passage in verse 34 and focus on the second aspect what does this incredible act of salvation, this greater act of new creation, this new exodus what does it involve? Why is this so much better? I think a second thing that is emphasized in this text as part of this new salvation will involve a radical a free forgiveness of sin that even goes beyond the grace and forgiveness that God showed to Israel in the past. At the end of chapter 31, verse 34, “I will forgive their inequity, and I will remember their sin no more.” In the experience of exile this is exactly and precisely what Israel needs because the exile was God’s punishment for their sin. So as God is promising this radical and free forgiveness that’s what makes the salvation possible in the book of Isaiah. The Lord says, “announce to the people that their years of hard labor and service are over.” Now it’s the time of forgiveness. God is no longer holding his sin or holding the sin of the people against them.

In chapter 14 the people in Jeremiah’s day come to the Lord and they give God this confession of sin. It looks good; it sounds good; they say the right words;
it’s everything you would want in a confession of sin except for one thing, there is no real genuine repentance in their lives. The Lord says, I don't accept their confession and there is a specific statement made. The Lord does not accept them; the Lord will remember their iniquity and punish their sins. So why does Israel go through the experience of exile? Why is Judah taken away into captivity? Because the Lord remembers their sins and they are going to have to be punished for that.

The deliverance obviously in the new covenant the Lord is no longer going to remember their sins. So there is this promise that Israel absolutely deserved what they experienced in the exile but there is this promise that the Lord is going to radically and freely forgive their sins. He is going to blot them out; he is going to take them away. Again, the message of Jeremiah and the message of the second half of Isaiah is also talking about the deliverance from exile. We see the same thing here in Isaiah chapter 43 verse 25. In the second part of Isaiah it says this: “I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake.” Why does God forgive Israel? It is not because of who they are. It is for his own sake and the Lord says he blots them out. In other words, he takes an eraser and simply removes them from the record. Through the exile, God has held them accountable for their sin. He's punished them; he's put them in servitude because of their sin. But this forgiveness will mean the removal of the sin that has necessitated the punishment in the first place. The Lord says this: “and I will not remember your sins.” So Isaiah 43 verse 25 says exactly the same thing as Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 34. He says put me in remembrance and let us argue together, set forth your case so you may be proved right. Your first fathers sinned and your mediators transgressed against me but the Lord is getting ready to forgive his people. Chapter 44 verse 22 is another promise in the second half of Isaiah about the forgiveness of Israel’s sins. The Lord says, I have blotted out your transgression like a cloud and your sins like a mist.” So the Lord says your sin is like the fog in the morning that disappears. The Lord had sent them into captivity for their sin but when he delivers them their sins are going to be wiped away. They are going to disappear
like a cloud. Then he says this in Isaiah 44:22 “Return to me for I have redeemed you.” Here is how radical this forgiveness is going to be in Isaiah 44:22 the Lord forgives them even before they return to him and sometimes in the prophets there is an interplay between divine initiative and human responsibility.

Now you might be asking well we have all kinds of examples of forgiveness throughout the Old Testament. One of the key characteristics about God’s character and one of the things God reveals about himself up front is Yahweh, the covenant keeping God, is that he is a God who is slow to anger, abounding in mercy and all of those kinds of things we’ve seen that throughout the history of the Old Testament. But I believe that in the new covenant there is a degree of forgiveness being offered here that wasn’t true even under the first covenant. In the old covenant in the way that things were set up under the Mosaic law, sacrifices that provided atonement for sin there was a requirement of sacrifice. Sacrifice only required atonement for certain types of sins and only provided atonement for unintentional sins.

When someone like David committed a defiant act of sin against God and he committed adultery Bathsheba and murdered her husband, David has no sacrifice that he can offer at that point to resolve that issue with God. So he has to come to God in Psalm 51 and throw himself on the mercy of the court and plead for God to blot out his sin God did that for David and God throughout Israel’s history does that for them. Often when there’s no sacrifice for the sin, God provides it, but what this covenant is promising is that type of free mercy and grace and forgiveness doesn’t necessarily distinguish between intentional and unintentional sin the way that the sacrifices did. God’s going to give that to Israel.

Israel constantly had the need on a yearly basis for the Day of Atonement to cover all of the sins that were not covered by the other sacrifices. There was no way that even an individual Israelite could have offered a sacrifice that would cover everyone of their sins. So, that yearly need for atonement reminded them that if they were going to live in the presence of God, they needed those sins
atoned for. They needed the defilement of their sins that was accumulated on the altar cleared away so that they could actually have the opportunity to live in God’s presence for another year. So God graciously did that for them on a yearly basis but I believe that what the promise of the new covenant involves is that there is going to be a level of mercy and forgiveness beyond what Israel has even experienced in their past history. It’s the radical nature of that forgiveness and the depth of mercy that is what’s going to grab the heart of the wife and ultimately convince Israel to be faithful people.

You see as we look at forgiveness in the Bible and as we look at God’s grace, really experiencing that forgiveness does not lead us to say look at what we can get away with. Real forgiveness transforms our heart to the point that we want to say, I want to live for God and I want to express back to him my devotion and my love for the great love that he has shown to me. Forgiveness doesn’t motivate liaisons, forgiveness motivates love and commitment. Paul says we should not say, “let us sin more that grace may abound God forbid,” we’ve been delivered from our sin and part of the way God delivers this from that sin is the power of the love of forgiveness. Israel has experienced that in all kinds of ways in their past history when they cheated on God on their honeymoon by worshipping the golden calf before the tablets had even been fully worked out. God extended mercy and grace to them “but the covenant I make with them in the future is not going to be like the one that I made when I brought them out of Egypt.” It’s going to be better than that offering a deeper level of forgiveness and a deeper experience of the forgiveness of God is going to be a part of that.

In making the new covenant how does the new covenant resolve the issues that have been raised by the failures under the old covenant? With regard to the past it provides forgiveness for all of the sins and the failures that have occurred in the hundreds of years up to this point. But there also needs to be something if this new covenant is going to work well, what about the future? How are we going to guarantee that this pattern of sin doesn’t continue? Well, the forgiveness in part is
going to motivate that. But a second component of this new salvation that God is promising to Israel, what’s going to be at the heart of this new covenant is that the Lord is going to give his people a new enablement and a new capacity to obey the Lord. The way that that is explained in the book of Jeremiah is that Jeremiah says the Lord is going to write his law on their hearts. So in the old covenant the law was written on the stones and it was this commandment that stood externally to the people and commanded them to do certain things. In the same way that when we see a “don’t walk on the grass” or “wet paint” we just have this internal desire. Without an internal desire to keep that external commandment we’re not going to follow. So what God is promising there is I’m going to give you a desire not to walk on the grass. When you see that wet paint I’m going to put the desire of the person who put that sign there in the first place in you. I’m going to give you the enablement and the capacity to obey me and to keep these laws and these commandments.

It is again the solution to the problem that was especially true of the people in Jeremiah’s day. The forgiveness of sin the Lord had said to Jeremiah “I’m going to remember their sins and punish them.” So the solution is the Lord says, “I’m going to forget their sins and not remember them.” When the Lord says, “I’m going to give them a new heart and I’m going to write the law on their heart,” this specifically reverses what we read about in Jeremiah 17 verse 1. Here’s the condition of the people that Jeremiah’s ministering to. He says, “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of a diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart.” So think about these iron tools that were used to inscribe messages and letters and words on tablets. In the same way the sin of Israel is deeply etched into their hearts and their character. It’s their nature and they do not have a desire to obey God. So what God is going to do is take hearts that have sin etched into them and he’s going to erase that and replace that with a heart that has his word etched into it and then they will have the eternal desire to obey God. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick, who can
understand it.” The Lord is going to do heart surgery for his people and he’s going to cure their heart problem.

Chapter 32 verses 39 to 40 clarifies that when God writes the law on the heart of his people they will have the desire to obey him; they will always be faithful. The Lord is going to put his fear within them and they will keep the law and this disaster of exile that the people experienced in the days of Jeremiah, they’re never going to have go through that again because the new covenant will give them the ability and the capacity to obey.

New Heart in the Old Testament

So as we start thinking about this idea of new covenant and new heart there’s all kinds of passages from the Old Testament that start running through my mind. This idea that God is going to give a new heart to his people is something that has already been talked about back in the book of Deuteronomy and I want us to notice a movement that takes place in the book of Deuteronomy that I think is reflective of what’s going on in Jeremiah as well. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 16 the Lord says to the people “circumcise therefore the foreskin of your hearts and be no longer stubborn.” Cut away that hard part on the outside of your heart that is keeping you from obeying God. Circumcise your heart and experience a heart transformation. Give your heart to God so that you will have a desire to obey him. Notice here God is commanding Israel to do that. We know that the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy and the rest of the Old Testament are a hard hearted people and ultimately they are going to be sent away into exile. So in Deuteronomy 30 what is God going to do for his people when they’re in exile. He says this: “when they come back to him and when they repent and when they turn to the Lord when they’re living in these countries the Lord will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all of your hearts.” Deuteronomy begins with the idea circumcise your heart to the Lord that’s your responsibility. The people cannot do it, ultimately God will give them a new heart and God will give them the capacity to obey. Now, they had the
ability to obey, we’ll talk about that but they chose not to follow the Lord. The Lord ultimately is going to intervene and do heart surgery that will transform them.

We see this same movement in the book of Ezekiel chapter 18 verse 31 which says this: “Cast away from you all of the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourself a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel.” So what does God tell Israel to do, get a new heart? Get right with God, turn away from your sin, get a new heart. Why should you die for your sin and if you don’t experience this heart transformation that’s where you’re heading? So it something that God tells the people of Israel to do, they are to circumcise their heart.

The Lord says to the people in Ezekiel chapter 11, verse 19, “I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.” So Deuteronomy says circumcise yourself to the Lord, circumcise your heart. The people are rebellious and stiff necked when they are sent away into exile, but God will circumcise their hearts. The book of Ezekiel, get yourself a new heart, why should you die. But ultimately they experience the judgment of exile because they will not turn back to God. What does God promise them? “I will give them a new heart.”

That same movement, is present in the book of Jeremiah. In the call to return that is given at the very beginning of the book, remember the metaphor that’s used there. Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 2, “Circumcise your heart, plow up the soil resistant and return to God, circumcise your heart.” The people ultimately do not do that. Why? Because the sin that they love is engraved on their hearts, that’s their desire, that’s their heart. So what does God promise to do to Jeremiah? He promises to give them a new heart.

So the same movements from get a new heart, the people don’t do it. God ultimately gives them a new heart, that’s not just Jeremiah, it’s Deuteronomy, and it’s Ezekiel as well. There’s a pattern, God is going to do the heart surgery that
will bring about the transformation of his people.

Coming Restoration

We may ask ourselves the question, God’s going to write the law on their heart and give them the desire to obey, God’s going to do the heart surgery on them. How? How does that happen? How does God ultimately write the law on his heart? We begin to bring in some other passages and some other promises from the prophets. You see Jeremiah is somewhat unique in the terminology of the new covenant. But there are a number of other prophets who are basically talking about the same thing. This covenant that God is going to make with Israel in the future, the timing of the new covenant is going to the timing of the kingdom and the restoration. So, the new covenant is not something that is exclusive to Jeremiah, it really goes along with the promise’s of restoration that we read throughout the prophets and the specific way, as we take Jeremiah, and as we lay that passage beside these other promises about what God is going to do in the lives of the people of Israel to bring about this restoration.

Here’s the way that he is going to write the law on their hearts. He is going to do that by pouring out in a new way, in a fresh way, his own spirit. So the writing of the law on the heart in Jeremiah is connected to a number of other prophetic passages that are specifically going to talk about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the pouring out of God’s spirit. Let me just mention a couple of these. Isaiah chapter 32 verses 14 and 18 “Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, but Judah and Israel are going to be under judgment.” Verse 14 says, “The palace is forsaken, how long is that going to last.” Verse 15, “Until the spirit is poured out from us on high and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.” What’s going to bring about the transformation? The Lord is going to pour out his spirit in a new way. How is the Lord going to write the law on his hearts of his people? He’s going to put his own spirit into them. Chapter 59 in Isaiah verses 20 and 21 the Lord says there, “a redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn away from their transgressions, declares the Lord. And as
for me, this is my covenant with them.” Doesn’t talk about new covenant, but this is the future covenant that God’s going to make with his people. The Lord says, “My spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth shall not depart out of your mouth or out of the mouth of your offspring. I’m going to pour out my spirit and the spirit is going to put the words of God into the mouth of his people.”

Now what you remember in Jeremiah chapter 1, that’s what God did for Jeremiah as a prophet. Jeremiah swallowed those words and they were sweet to his taste and as a result of that Jeremiah became an embodied representation of the word of God, and he started to live out the word of God. That is what is ultimately going to happen to all of the people of Israel, they are going to become living representations of God’s word. Why? Because of the enablement and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Joel chapter 2 says that the last days will be the points in time where God pours out his spirit on all of flesh and all Israel, the young men, young woman, old men, old women, all of Israel, not just on the leaders the prophets, but the people themselves. There is going to be a pouring on the people of God, unlike anything that has ever been experience in the past. And that’s what’s going to make it possible for the law to be written on their hearts, so that they will have the power to obey.

Now it’s especially helpful to take Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31-34, and lay them beside what I think most closely parallels this in the prophets, Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 26-28. Let’s look at this passage. In our class, in this passage, I often hear my students take these two texts and lay them side-by-side and compare what things are in this passage that are similar and what things are in these passages that maybe are different. They inform are understanding of each. Here’s what Ezekiel says verse 26, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.” Jeremiah says, the Lord is going to write the law in our hearts. The message in Ezekiel is even more, the Lord is going to give you a new heart all together. He says, “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a
heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and to be careful to obey my rules."

So what was it in Jeremiah that enables them to obey? The Lord is going to write the law on their hearts. What is it in Ezekiel that is going to give the people the capacity to obey the Lord is going to put his Spirit in them. Therefore, what does Jeremiah mean when he says that God is going to write the law on the people's hearts. It means the Lord is going to enable obedience through the giving of his own Spirit. It’s as if Israel has been an unfaithful covenant partner, so the Lord is going to come within them in a way and in a capacity that will enable them to finally be a faithful covenant partner.

Now in light of all this and in light of what is promised for the future, I think it’s important to understand what Jeremiah is saying and what Jeremiah is not saying about the old covenant. He is promising that in the future there is going to be a greater enablement and greater empowerment. There is going to be a pouring out of the Spirit unlike anything Israel has ever experienced before. There is going to be a more radical forgiveness and all this is part of the enablement. What Jeremiah is not saying is that he is claiming that God had not provided power and enablement under the old covenant I think many people have this understanding, if Israel was ever going to obey God in the old covenant they were going to have to do it basically in their own strength. Circumcise your own heart, get yourself a new heart. If they were going to keep the law it was basically this kind of external thing, where they live by the rules. That it was a legalistic system. They didn’t have grace to help them to do that. That’s not what Jeremiah was saying about the old covenant.

He is also not saying that God set his people up for failure and made it so that it was impossible for them to obey him under the old covenant. That’s not true! God through the salvation that he provided at the exodus, God had provided a salvation that offered spiritual transformation to the people of Israel. The problem was that many of the individuals that lived within the nation of Israel at
that time did not avail themself to the grace that was there. It is not saying that there was no grace in the old covenant and the difference is the new covenant is going to provide grace. It is saying that what will be different about the old covenant and the new covenant is that the people will fully avail themselves to this overwhelming grace that God is going to pour out on them. When the Lord says in Deuteronomy 10, “Circumcise your hearts” or when the prophet Jeremiah says “circumcise your hearts,” if the Lord did not give them the ability to determine in their heart that they were going to follow the Lord then that’s basically an empty command. The fact that the Lord is commanding them to do that seems to reflect that they had capacity if they responded to God in the right way to obey him and to keep his commands. When Moses gives them the Mosaic Law he reminds them of their covenant responsibilities in Deuteronomy 30. He does not tell the people of Israel you can’t keep the Mosaic Law because it is impossible. He tells them God has given you the ability to obey his law. Also in Deuteronomy 30, verse 11, “The commandment that I command today is not too hard for you. It is neither a far off in the heavens that you have to ascend up into the heaven to get it. It’s not down into the depths of the earth where you have to dig. It’s right in front of you.”

The Lord by what he did for the people at the exodus through the miracle of salvation, the Lord had made spiritual personal transformation available. The problem is that many of the people under the old covenant never availed themselves of that. Under the old covenant as individuals responded to the grace of God they believed in God. I believed that they experienced a spiritual regeneration and a transformation that is similar to what we experienced as believers today. As they came to know the Lord in a personal way, God did a work of transformation in their lives where they had the capacity to love him, obey him, and have the law written on their hearts. The Psalmists says in Psalm 37, verses 30-31, “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.” So there were people under the old covenant that experienced exactly what Jeremiah is promising, “I’ll write
the law on their hearts.” The Psalmist says, “I got that.” In chapter 40, verses 7-8, David as the king says, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. “ David says as the king I realize that the book of law has some things to say to me, it’s written about me. I wrote a copy of it as I came to the throne, but then he also says verse 8, “I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

So the old covenant did not involve people straining and trying as hard as they could in their own effort in some human external way to obey God in a legalistic way. They experienced spiritual transformation. I believe that some of them experienced a regenerative work of the spirit and the ministry of the spirit. The work of the spirit in the Old Testament is not clearly laid out and expanded for us, but I believe that it was there in some real way. There was a transformation that people like David truly knew the Lord; they experienced that. In Psalm 119 David in these lavish ways expresses how much he loves the law of God. It’s more precious to him than honey, sweeter to him than honey, more precious than gold. Their saying if David is this excited about Leviticus imagine what he would feel like if he could read Romans and 1 John. But even as an old covenant believer he loved the law of God and in that Psalm he doesn’t just express love for God’s word, he also says God do your work in my life that will give me the disposition and the will to obey this. He realizes he can’t do this on his own, give me the grace that I need. God willingly afforded that to people that came to know him in a personal way.

When David had sinned, after his sin with Bathsheba, and after he had hidden this sin, finally, after the long period of just turning away from God he comes to God in Psalm 51 and says this, “Created me a new heart and renew a right spirit within me.” What David is envisioning there is the work of spiritual transformation that makes it possible whether their under the old covenant or the new covenant for an individual to obey the Lord and follow his commands. That was provided for the people under the old covenant.
If that’s true and it makes sense, when what we do with passages like Deuteronomy 29 verses 2-4 Moses says to the people here, Moses summoned all the people in Israel. “You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants.” Your eyes have seen this. “But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” What’s going on there? I think the point is more of the fact that the people have not availed themselves to the grace that God has made available and as a result of that their punishment has been that they have not experienced the transformation of the heart that Lord did for those who truly knew him. For the generation that came out of Egypt all of them died in the wilderness because they had a rebellious heart. Even in the generation that’s preparing to go in to the land, there are large numbers of those people who do not know the Lord in a personal way.

So these descriptions of Israel as being stiffed necked and rebellious and hardhearted, we might look at that and say well you know what God just set his people up for failure. In an ultimate sense that is true, ultimately there needed to be a savior. But in that old covenant when individuals came to know the Lord, God provided the capacity for them to obey.

So here’s the different between the old covenant and the new covenant. The old covenant was a national covenant that was made with the entire nation of Israel. As a national covenant, that covenant involved and included both believers and unbelievers. It involved people that as ethnic Jews experienced the deliverance of the exodus. But there were also people within that group that had never personally placed their faith and trust in God. They have never experienced that personal transformation. As we go through out Israel’s history it appears that the remnant of those who truly knew the Lord and had experienced personal salvation was often a tiny minority. The nation that did not know the Lord; they were stiff necked, they were rebellious and they were hard hearted. They were the ones who the Lord had not yet “to this day given you a heart to understand to obey.” But that
was their own choice; that was not the failure of the covenant itself. Those who truly knew the Lord who in personal repentance and faith came to know him they experienced heart transformation. The difference between the old covenant and the new covenant is that in the new covenant every individual who is a part of that covenant will know the Lord in a personal way. Every person who belongs to that covenant will truly have a saving relationship with God. When people come into that saving relationship with God through faith and repentance God does this work of transformation.

The old covenant was in many ways like our church roles. Our church roles are made up of members and people who know the Lord in a deeply personal way. But, our church roles are also made up with people who have no relationship with God. They may be a member of the church, but they don’t know the Lord. That’s Israel under the covenant. In most cases, it seems like the majority of the people were those who had never experienced a personal salvation. The empowerment of the new covenant is that God will enable the entire nation to follow him. Here’s when the pattern of sin is going to be broken; here’s why exile will never have to take place again because everyone who is a part of this covenant is going to know the Lord, and be a part of God’s people.

But Jeremiah, and the Old Testament as a whole, is not saying that people in the old covenant did not know about or did not experience this kind of transformation. Remember when Jesus says to Nicodemus in John chapter 3. “You must be born again…” you must experience a spiritual transformation in order to come into the kingdom of heaven!” And Nicodemus says, “What do you mean by ‘new birth’? What are you talking about? Can I enter into my mother’s womb again and be reborn? Jesus what are you talking about?” And Jesus says to him, “Are you telling me that as a teacher of Israel, you don’t know about these things? You don’t know about Ezekiel 36?” This is a heart transformation that God has always done for those who truly knew him, but the empowerment and the enablement of the new covenant is that everyone who is part of the covenant will
know the Lord. So there’s the forgiveness for the past, and then there is the enablement for the future.

Promises of the New Covenant

Now quickly, we’re coming near the end of our time here, I want to work through what are the other specific promises given about the new covenant in chapters 31-34. After God put the Law in the hearts of his people, it says in chapter 31, verse 33, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” So, this is the restoration of the covenant relationship. That expression is known as the “Covenant Formulary.” The Lord is their God, Israel is God’s people, that’s going to be restored. “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother saying ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest.” Every one who is part of this covenant will have a direct, personal relationship with God. In many ways, in the old covenant, because it was a national covenant, the way this was set up between people there were both believers and unbelievers. God’s presence was largely mediated to the people of Israel through their priests, through their prophets, through their leaders. In the new covenant there is going to be a more direct relationship with God because every one who is a part of the covenant will know the Lord.

Then finally, we come back to the promise that we focused on earlier in the lesson. God says, “I will forgive their iniquity; and I will remember their sin no more.” All of those things: the forgiveness of sin, the writing of the Law on their heart, the restoration of the covenant relationship, and the direct knowledge of God, that’s the enablement, that’s the empowerment, that’s the great work of salvation, that’s the second Exodus that will be greater than the first. As believers in Christ, we should be excited about this because the New Testament is going to clarify that this new covenant is not just for the house of Israel, it’s not just for the house of Judah. As the people of God, we’re experiencing this new covenant now.

Jesus says as he goes to the cross and he gives the cup to his disciples on the night before his death, “this cup represents the blood that is going to affect the
new covenant that Jeremiah promised.” Jeremiah promised the new covenant. Jesus enables and brings into reality what the new covenant promised. We live as followers of Jesus, experiencing the blessings of new covenant where God has put his spirit within us. We are not just forgiven. We are empowered to live in a new way.

Christ and the New Covenant

Now in light of that, I want to close with a quote. John Goldingay says, “we as New Testament believers live in the time of fulfillment, we live in the time of the new covenant, we live in the time where there has been this pouring out of the Spirit. And whatever ministry the Spirit had in the Old Testament, we realize that through the death of Christ there has been a greater pouring out of the Spirit. The love of God because of what Jesus did for us on the cross has a greater capacity to grip our hearts and to change our lives.” But Goldingay says, “Think about that in light of what we see often in our own experience, and in the life of the church as a whole.” He says, “In practice and lives of Christian believers are not very different than from those of Old Testament believers… We are like Ruth and Hanna, who produce the fruit of the Spirit. But we are also like Jacob and David, who more obviously live according to the flesh.” Then he goes on and says, “Think about this pouring out of the Spirit. When we look at our own lives sometimes or the lives of the believers in the New Testament (for example in the book of Corinthians).” Goldingay says, “It is as if the Spirit is not yet given. Or rather, if we look at it from the perspective of 1 Corinthians, it is not as if the Spirit is not yet given; far from it. In fact, it is as if the giving of the Spirit has brought more problems to be solved.” So the Corinthian church is as liable to covenant lawsuit and divine casting out as was the people of God in Old Testament Israel.

As believers in Christ, we need to come to understand the enablement and the empowerment that we have under the new covenant. God has given us the eternal desire and the ability to obey him. Those of us who are ministers of the Gospel and ministers of the new covenant need to realize the power of the
message that we share, and the power of that message to change peoples’ lives. We do not change peoples’ lives by our preaching, our personalities, our programs, or our churches. We change peoples’ lives by the life-changing message of the new covenant that God forgives the sins of the past, and God enables us to obey as we look toward the future.

In our next lesson, we will reflect more on how we understand the new covenant in light of the New Testament and the added revelation that’s given us there. But as we close this lesson, we can celebrate the empowerment and the enablement that we have because we have already begun to experience what Jeremiah promised to the people of Israel and Judah, that would be a part of their restoration and their return to the Lord.

Transcribed by Henry Gedney, Ryan Paulsen, Eric Driscoll, Terence Paquette, Zachary Colvin, Beth Knight and edited by Daniel Cameron
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Promises of Restoration

Throughout our study of the book of Jeremiah we certainly have taken time to look at the prophets’ messages of judgment but we’ve also had an opportunity near the end of the course here to talk more about the positive aspects of Jeremiah’s message of restoration. The key passage in Jeremiah 30 – 33, of course, is the promise of the new covenant. This is the new covenant that God is going to make that really bridges the story of salvation in the Old Testament over into the fulfillment of all that God is designing and intending to do in Christ. As we look at the promise sections of the Old Testament prophets, they’re basically four key promises that are central to what they understand, the future restoration of Israel, the kingdom of God, what that will look like? Number One, they talk about a return to the land and God bringing his people back from exile. Number two, they talk about a rebuilding of the cities (in Judah and particularly), a rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. That aspect is definitely present in the book of Jeremiah, although emphasis on the rebuilding of the temple is not really there. There is the coming of the future messiah as the third important element. And then, fourthly, this promise is not just for Israel - ultimately the blessings of restoration, the kingdom, will include the nations as well.

Aspects of Restoration Fulfillment: Near and Far

So, those are the key promises that we’re looking at in the book of restoration. I want us to think about, in a couple of sessions, as we apply this message in light of all of Scripture, when does this restoration occur? How do we understand the fulfillment of these promises of restoration, the new covenant, and coming kingdom? How do we understand their fulfillment? There’s a key concept that is going to run through this session and the next one. It’s the idea that the
promises of restoration are both now and not yet. In terms of Israel’s history, there is an aspect of this restoration in Jeremiah’s perspective that is near and far. There is going to be a restoration that takes place in seventy years when God brings his people back from exile, but that restoration really looks forward to a further restoration, a return that is going to bring the kingdom of God to earth, and that’s something that, in the prophets, have been spoken about being in the last days.

The prophets did not always see the difference between the near and the far restorations, but as we see the unfolding of salvation’s history, as we’re given the additional perspective of New Testament revelation, we understand that these prophecies about the last days, the restoration, the new covenant, the return to the land, and the Kingdom of God, are fulfilled in stages.

Three Stages of Restoration

I would like us to think about this from the perspective of the promises of restoration being fulfilled in three distinct stages. First of all, stage number one, and this is definitely part of the perspective of Jeremiah, is that there is a restoration that comes about as the people return from the exile and return to the land that took place in history in 536 BC. Remember, Jeremiah prophesies the exile is going to last for seventy years, and if we imagine 605 BC being the beginning of the exile and 538 BC being the end of that, we have sixty-seven years. If we have a slightly different date – if we date that from 586 to 538 BC, but there’s basically seven years used as a round number to talk about the time of exile. The generation that went down into exile is not going to be the generation that returns. There’s going to be an entire lifetime when the people of Israel will be in the land, but when Babylon falls to the Persians and to Cyrus in 538 BC, Cyrus issues the decree in 536 BC that allows the Jews to return to the promise land. That is the first stage of the fulfillment of the promises of Jeremiah and the other prophets regarding the return to the land. But that return to the land was really only stage one of the fulfillment. It did not completely fulfill all of the promises that Isaiah or Jeremiah or the other of the Old Testament prophets make
about the restoration. In fact, if that is the only fulfillment of those promises, Isaiah and Jeremiah seem to have missed things by a wide margin. Sometimes we see things that are advertised for us. Maybe we find a hotel on www.expedia.com and when we get there we find out that maybe the people advertising this shot it with an interesting angle or some different pictures than what we’re really seeing. If the return from exile that occurred in history, if that’s all that the prophets were talking about, their language is incredibly idealistic.

So there seems to be a fulfillment that has to extend beyond that. There has to be a return that will go beyond the return. There has to be a restoration beyond what was experienced in history. I think we come to an understanding through the rest of Revelation and even in the history of the Old Testament from Jeremiah to the return to the land, the exile, in some sense, is not ended simply by the people coming back to the land.

Let me give us a few passages that I think help us to see this. In the book of Jeremiah – in Jeremiah 29, the prophet himself is going to talk about God’s plans for the people that are living in exile: “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you, to give you a hope and a future…. This is what the future entails in Jeremiah 29:12-15: “You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and you will find me. When you seek me with all of your heart, I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes.” The key expression that is used in 30-33, “And I will gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD and I will bring you back.” Jeremiah says God has committed himself to bring about the restoration and to work toward Israel’s future through the exiles. But this is not simply an automatic guarantee of their future blessing, they will be found by or they will come to experience these things when they seek the Lord. When they seek the Lord will all of their heart then they will experience the full blessings of restoration.

The reality as we look at the historical return from exile that occurred in
538 to 536 BC is that the people return to the land, or as least many of them did, but they changed their geography without really changing their spiritual condition and their heart for God. Their full restoration would depend upon them seeking God with all of their heart. So there’s a balance in all of this between God’s saving initiatives to restore his people and the responses that they would have to those saving initiatives that God would bring. We see that in the book of Daniel as well.

We talked about this passage previously. Daniel, based on the promises of Jeremiah that the exile would last for seventy years. In Daniel chapter nine is praying for God to fulfill his promises. He’s confessing his sin, he’s confessing the sin of the people, and he’s praying on the basis of God’s promises that the restoration would come about. God is going to give an additional revelation to Daniel in response to that prayer that clarifies for us in some degree the message of Jeremiah. God is going to say to Daniel, “Yes, Jeremiah prophesied that within 70 years the people would return to the land.” But in Daniel 9:24-27 we receive the additional revelation that the full restoration of Israel, “making a full,” the full restoration of the covenant relationship, the reestablishment of the temple, Israel being securely established in the land, will not happen for 70 weeks of seven years. Whether we take that as a literal 490 year period, or looking at the way dates and time periods are used in apocalyptic literature (simply a reference to a long time,) we have the reality here that the full restoration is not going to occur simply when the people come back to the land as a result of Cyrus’ decree.

We have an interesting prayer from Nehemiah, who is one of the civil leaders of the people of Israel as they come back to the land. I just want to read the prayer in Nehemiah 9:36-37. The people have already come back to the land, they're beginning to experience the blessing of return that Jeremiah prophesied about. In fact, Nehemiah's leading one of the later waves of that return, and here’s what he says: “Behold, we are slaves this day, in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we’re slaves. And its rich yield goes to kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our
bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.” Now the people have been in the land for basically a hundred years – the first return occurred in the previous century – but Nehemiah, as he's looking at this, is saying that we're still in bondage and in slavery. All of the promises of deliverance and the yoke being broken; we're still under foreign oppression. So the return from exile that began with Cyrus' decree is not the complete fulfillment of the promises that God made to Jeremiah about the return and restoration of the people of Israel.

Post-exilic Prophets and the Return

We start looking at the message of the post-exilic prophets, and we see that in a clearer way. The prophet Joel, who appears to be, from certain clues and indicators we get in the book, a post-exilic prophet, talks about a locust invasion that God has brought against the people that severely devastated the land, and the locust plague was specifically brought against them for their sins. Joel warns them that if they don't listen to what God has done or pay attention to the judgment that God has brought against them, hat the Lord is going to bring an army against them that is going to bring even greater devastation than the locust plague. Joel, as a prophet of judgment, is going to say the same thing that the prophets said before the exile, “Beware the day of the Lord is coming.” Now fortunately it seems that the people, as we read Joel 2, responded to those warnings and repented, but the reality is that even in the post-exilic period there are further warnings of judgment because the people have not fully come back to God.

Another post-exilic prophet, Zechariah, who encouraged the people in the rebuilding of the temple (and may have come before the time of Joel) – he's going to talk about a return that is still future to the return that has already been experienced. He says the Lord is again going to bring the people of Israel from all the far and distant lands to which they had been exiled. So the return that had begun before the time of Zechariah, did not exhaust the promises that were given by prophets like Jeremiah. In fact, Zechariah, at the end of his book as he has visions about Israel's future, he envisions, another exile, and another invasion and
judgment of the people of Israel that is going to look in many ways like the judgment that was experienced in the days of Jeremiah. Listen to this vision that Zechariah gives about the future of Israel. This whole scenario, of unfaithfulness, disobedience to God, covenant curses, judgment, military invasion, exile, defeat and death – all this is going to come again, because the people have not come back to God. Zechariah says [14:1-2], “Behold, a day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped.” So, the terrible things that Judah experienced in the days of Jeremiah, Zechariah, as a prophet of the post-exilic period says, this is going to happen all over again! It says half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as when he fights on a day of battle. So there is going to be a judgment. God will ultimately intervene, he will restore his people, and the survivors of both Israel and the nation will come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. But there is an exile, return, restoration, deliverance that goes beyond what was experienced in the return that took place in the post-exilic period.

The final prophet that we see in the Old Testament (the Old Testament closes with the prophet): Malachi. Malachi definitely envisions that there is a broken spiritual relationship between God and his people in the post-exilic period. In many ways the spiritual condition of the people in his day looks very similar to what we see during the time of Jeremiah. In fact, the book of Malachi is built around a series of disputes, between God and his people, where the Lord is indicting them for not paying there tithes, not loving him, not obeying him, not following his covenant dictates. At one place, the prophet gives a word of the Lord where the Lord says to the people, “I have loved you,” and it talks about God's covenant love for Israel. The people's response to that is, “How have you loved us?” So obviously there's a definite problem with the spiritual condition of Israel in the post-exilic period. Malachi’s final promise is that in the last days, the Lord
is going to raise up a prophet in the prophet Elijah. The purpose of this eschatological Elijah, which we understand from the New Testament that's fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist, will be to turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord and back to covenant faithfulness to him. So Jeremiah was calling upon the people to *shuv*, to return to God. The Lord promises in the restoration that he is going to *shuv* to restore the fortunes of the people, but Malachi is still talking about the fact that there is a need for the people hearts to turn back to God. So this restoration that Jeremiah is prophesying, as we start to look at how it unfolds, it becomes kind of messy.

**Unending Exile in Jeremiah**

As we look at what's going on in the immediate aftermath of exile, and the continued disobedience that we talked about and narrated in chapters 40-43. There's a theology of unending exile even in the book of Jeremiah itself. The last episode and story in the book of Jeremiah is this appendix in chapter 52, about the fall of Jerusalem and the fact that the kings of Judah are in exile. There's this glimmer of hope with the release of Jehoiachin from prison, but the conditions of exile, that's the final word that we see at the end of Jeremiah 52.

**Transformed Heart Envisioned**

Now remember that in the new covenant, the promise that God gives to Israel is that he is going to circumcise their hearts. That's what Deuteronomy 30 says. Jeremiah says that God is going to write the law on the people's hearts, and Ezekiel says that the Lord is going to give Israel a new heart. I think those three images are basically saying the same thing: God is going to transform the heart of his people. So, as we come to the end of the Old Testament era, we understand that there has been a partial return, but it is not the full return that God envisioned. Stage one has taken place, but if we’re going to take the promises of the prophets seriously, there has to be something beyond this.

**New Testament and the Continued Exile: Matthew**

So we’re going to fast-forward through the Intertestamental Period, and
we’re going to come to the New Testament era and the time of Jesus. N. T. Wright and a number of other scholars have developed this important idea, we’ve seen this in Nehemiah’s prayer during the time of the post-exilic period in the Old Testament, that in Jesus’ day, there was still the idea that even though Israel was in the land, they were still living in exile, and they were still in bondage, and they were in bondage to the Romans. They were still as much under foreign oppression as they were back in the days of Nehemiah. So, the ongoing conditions of exile are still there, even though they’re back in the land, even though for a little while they enjoy a period of independence and then the Romans take that away; they’re still living under the conditions of exile.

There is a New Testament use of the book of Jeremiah in the Gospels that I think reflects this idea of continuing exile. Remember back in Jeremiah 31:15, as Jeremiah describes the conditions of exile, it’s a time of weeping and mourning. In fact, he says in chapter 31:15, “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children.” In light of the death and the exile, Rachel, the mother of many of the tribes, is grieving over what has happened to her people. That describes the conditions of exile. Remember that Jeremiah’s message is that when the return comes about, their weeping is going to be turned into rejoicing. That’s the reversal that God is planning to bring.

In Matthew chapter 2, in that horrible incident where Matthew tells us about Herod putting to death the children and the infants in and around Bethlehem because he’s trying to remove Jesus as a rival to the throne, Matthew says that what took place there, as the people in Jesus’ day grieved over the death of the innocents, he says, “This was to fulfill what was written in Jeremiah 31:15.” Rachel again is weeping for her children. Now, Matthew has a very interesting use of the Old Testament there. If you go back to the context of Jeremiah chapter 31, you say, “I don’t see this being a prediction of something that’s going to happen in Jesus’ day.” Well, the idea here of fulfillment is not necessarily one of prediction. Matthew is speaking about a pattern, a pattern that was true in the days of
Jeremiah: Rachel was weeping over her children, and the death, and the destruction, and the exile, and all of the catastrophes that went along with that. What Matthew is saying is that that pattern continues and is ultimately reaching its culmination in the life and ministry of Jesus. But, the conditions of exile are still there because Rachel is still weeping for her children, and the people of Israel are still living under foreign bondage where an oppressive evil king is killing their children. That’s exactly what was going on in Jeremiah’s day. It continues and carries over into the time of Jesus so the conditions of exile are still there.

The Continued Exile: Luke

Now a couple of passages in the New Testament make this more explicit are some of infancy and birth narratives that are found in the gospel of Luke. And I want to read a couple of these passages. Why was Jesus born? What did he come to do? The message I think Luke is going to introduce right at the front of his gospel is Jesus came to deliver the people of Israel from their exile. That deliverance did not come about simply by their return when Cyrus issued the decree. They are still under bondage; they are under oppression; even more importantly their still under the bondage to their own sins. The Lord comes to bring the worlds ends and Jesus is Israel’s messiah to bring about their full deliverance. So here is what Luke chapter 1, verse 68 says. This is Zechariah the father of John the baptizer, his response to the coming and what God is doing through John and Jesus: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.” And he is even using some of the same terminology that’s used to talk about the return in the book of Jeremiah. “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” He’s going to fulfill the covenant promises to David as part of this, “as he spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear.”
So he says look the reason that Jesus is coming is to fulfill all of those covenant promises to Israel. God is not finished with Israel in spite of all the things that have happened in their history. God has not set aside the covenant promises that he has given to Israel. The Lord ultimately makes those promises a reality is going to have to deliver them from the hands of their enemies. The real, full return from exile still has to happen.

Now in the next chapter of Luke, Anna this prophetess that the Lord allows to live long enough to see the coming of Jesus, she celebrates and rejoices in the coming of Jesus because she understands that all of those promises about restoration and kingdom and last days, Jesus is the fulfillment of those promises. Here is the reaction and the response that Anna is going to have. It says in Luke chapter 2, verse in 36 that there was a prophetess named Anna, who was advanced in years and lived with her husband for seven years from when she was a virgin and then a widow until she is eighty-four. She did not leave the temple and is worshiping with fasting and prayer day and night. And because of her devotion to God, God gives this wonderful blessing of seeing the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. It says this, “And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.” You know what she was waiting for? She was waiting for the fulfillment of the promises that Jeremiah said when he promised that the Lord would, shuv, restore the fortunes of his people.

So we come to the time of Jesus and the first coming of Jesus to be Israel’s savior is stage two of the fulfillment of those promises that Jeremiah made about the kingdom, the restoration, a new David, the blessing of Jerusalem – all of those things. One of the things that Scott McKnight has reminded us of in his book The King Jesus Gospel is that Jesus came earth to do a lot more than simply to die on the cross and pay for my sins and give me a ticket to go to heaven. Now that’s a wonderful thing and that personal salvation we experience is a great blessing. But Jesus ultimately came at his first coming to bring about the restoration of Israel
and through that to fulfill the last day’s kingdom promises that God had made to the people of Israel through the Old Testament prophets. Then ultimately, through all of that, to bring about what the Bible refers to as the “restoration of all things” that would come about when the Kingdom of God came to earth. So our personal salvation, and Jesus as my savior is an important thing, and it’s changed my life, but Jesus came to do much more than be my personal savior; he came to be the restorer of Israel. He came to bring about the promises of new covenant and writing on the hearts of his people and creating this people of God that would be finally faithful him. That’s all part of what Jesus is doing in his first coming.

So what all of this means, and this hugely important as we think about the prophets and eschatology and understanding how the Old Testament and New Testament work together. I remember in seminary beginning to come to an understanding of this and it began to unlock for me how do the Old and New Testament work together. It is simply this idea: the last days. When the prophets speak about in “the last days,” in “the days that are coming,” remember it’s an indistinct time table. But in the last days the kingdom of God is the eschatological era of blessing. Whatever we want to call this, that time that the prophets in the Old Testament were prophesying about and when Jeremiah is speaking about restoration and the last days and the kingdom of God and the eschaton that time period began at first coming of Jesus. It is not just something that relates to the second coming.

Already but Not Yet

So the Kingdom of God is not just the future, the kingdom of God that the prophets were looking forward is not just about the second coming of Jesus. It is something that began to be realized in its initial stages at the first coming of Jesus. So the way that we look, the future kingdom of God that Jeremiah saw in the future, the future kingdom and all these blessing that Isaiah and other prophets saw in the Old Testament, that time was inaugurated at the first coming of Jesus. It will be consummated at his second coming. For me, coming to understand that, I think
it really revolutionized my understanding of how the Old and New Testament really relate to each other.

People often ask the question “Are we living in the last days?” and there we ask about, “Do you believe Jesus is coming back soon?” But really the biblical answer to that is that we are indeed living in the last days. The last days began with the first coming of Jesus to earth. John says in 1 John 2:18 “Children it is now the last hour.” Those last days that Isaiah and Jeremiah saw, those began with the first coming of Jesus. We have been living in the last days for more than two thousand years.

Kingdom in the Old Testament

Maybe you’re a little skeptical about that and you wonder: can you really prove that? Is there any way you can demonstrate that? Is that just a theological system? Can you really demonstrate that? Let’s go back to some Old Testament passages and let’s look at some places where the prophets are talking about the kingdom and God coming to rule and reign and the deliverance and the blessing that he’s going to bring to Israel. First of all, Isaiah 52:7-10: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publish salvation, who says to Zion ‘Your God reigns.’” God is King! And beyond the idea that simply God is the eternal and everlasting king and he’s always been there, in a new way, God is beginning to reign by defeating his enemies, by bringing Israel home, by fulfilling these covenant promises.

What’s the promise that John and Jesus and the announcement that John and Jesus begin their ministry with? “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” So, the beautiful messengers that are blessed in Isaiah 52 for saying “Your God reigns,” – John and Jesus are those messengers.

Isaiah 61, verse 1, talking about the time of Israel’s restoration says this: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted to
proclaim, liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” So God is sending a prophetic herald to announce the coming of the Kingdom and the deliverance from exile. Isaiah, in a sense, was the first fulfillment of this. But in Luke 4 at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus stands up in the synagogue and he reads out of the scroll of Isaiah and the passage that he reads is the one that we just read here in Isaiah 61 and Jesus closes the reading by saying: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your midst.” You know what Isaiah was talking about, when he was talking about God’s future restoration and the deliverance from exile and the release of the captives in the year of God’s favor? I’m announcing to you that I’m the beginning of that. The era of the kingdom that the prophets talked about, the time when God would bring about the restoration the Jeremiah was promising; that begins with the first coming of Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost when God pours out the Spirit on the disciples, Peter says “This is to fulfill what was prophesized by Joel who said ‘in the last days the Lord would pour out the spirit on all flesh.’” In Jesus’ ministry when John is in prison and he’s really discouraged and disappointed because things haven’t exactly turned out the way he thought they would and he sends messengers to Jesus to say, “Are you the one that’s promised? Are you the messiah? Are you going to bring back the restoration or should we wait for someone else?” Jesus tells those messengers to go back to John, and he quotes Isaiah 35:5-6, they talk about the kingdom and the restoration and he says: “Go back to John and report the report the eyes of the blind are being opened. The ears of the deaf are being unstopped. The lame are leaping like deer. The blessings of the kingdom the prophets promised are beginning. The last days have arrived.”

Now, as we think about stage two, the kingdom’s blessings have come, the time of the kingdom announced by the prophets has come. But Jesus would ultimately bring about this restoration from exile for the people of Israel by dying for their sins. Ultimately, there had to be a sacrifice for their sins.
Jesus and the New Covenant

So Jeremiah had promised that in the last days God would make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. In Luke 22:20 at the time of the last supper as Jesus is preparing to die, he says: “This cup that is being poured out for you represents the blood of the covenant from the Jeremiah promises.” How is the new covenant, how are the blessings of the new covenant going to be fulfilled, and how are the promises of the kingdom going to be brought about? They are brought about through the death of the one who is the king himself. That is the irony of just how God works out salvation’s history. The one who comes to bring in this kingdom is ultimately going to have to die so that his people can experience all of these blessings.

What that means is, that we had stage one when the people returned from exile by the decree of Cyrus, seventy years after the beginning. We had a stage two with the coming of Jesus at his first coming. The kingdom is inaugurated at that time but the king actually has to die. There will need to be a stage three associated with the second coming of Jesus when those kingdom and those restoration promises are going to be consummated. All the promises that Jeremiah said, why have they not been realized, why has the kingdom still not fully achieved everything that the prophets promised? Well because there is a stage three. That stage three is going to occur at the second coming of Jesus. So, have the prophecies and have the promises of Jeremiah been fulfilled? Yes, and no. They are now and not yet. The blessings of the new covenant had been brought into effect by the death of Christ, but the full experience and the restoration of all men that God promised to his people, Israel, have not been realized.

Jesus and Unbelief

Part of the reason why there is a need for stage three is that Jesus as he came at his first coming to bring about the fulfillment of the blessings of the kingdom, to announce that a time of God’s favor had come – even as Jesus has come to announce that and to announce the blessings of the kingdom he’s bringing
– his ministry is met with rejection and unbelief. So, the people of Israel in Jesus’
day, Jeremiah announced the blessings of the new covenant, five to six hundred
years before the time of Jesus, they are still living in exile, waiting for deliverance
from oppression, waiting for deliverance from their sin. But as Jesus comes to
announce, “I’m the one who’s the fulfillment of that,” his ministry is met with
rejection and unbelief. You know you don’t look like the kind of king we were
anticipating. How can you be the one who is bringing about this glorious
restoration that’s promised by an Isaiah and Jeremiah? So Jesus is met with
opposition. Stage two has arrived, but it’s only going to be a partial fulfillment of
what was promised because of that unbelief. The response of rejection and
unbelief that Israel has toward with the ministry of Jesus means that all that the
new covenant had promised and all that was envisioned for the restoration of
Israel by the prophets was not going to be fully realized in the first coming of
Jesus. As a result of that unbelief, Jesus is going to play another roll for the people
of Israel, and this is where the book of Jeremiah again comes to play in all of this.

Sometimes in New Testament studies, Jeremiah is treated as the lesser
cousin of the book of Isaiah, and I understand why, because of how much Isaiah
has influenced the message of the New Testament, and how much the restoration,
as it’s portrayed in the New Testament, is done from the perspective of Isaiah. But
I think we need to give Jeremiah his due as well; the role of Jeremiah in how
salvation history is working out. Jeremiah plays a significant role as well.

Jesus and Jeremiah

And what happens in the ministry of Jesus as he confronts this unbelief and
we deal with the reality that the people of Israel are not going to respond to his
message in faith. Is that Jesus becomes a Jeremiah-like prophet in confronting the
unbelief of the people of Israel. In the Matthew version of the episode where Jesus
asks his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” The disciples say, “Some of them
are saying that you're one of the prophets or you're Jeremiah.” As you look at the
ministry of Jesus, there's an obvious reason why the people of Israel may have
associated Jesus with a prophet like Jeremiah. He is like Jeremiah, because of the unbelief of his people. Remember Jesus come to be your savior your messiah, but he is also going to become a prophet because of their unbelief who announces that God is going to destroy Jerusalem and the temple just like Jeremiah did.

In Mark 11 we have the story where near the end of his ministry Jesus goes in, cleanses the temple, and takes the money changers out. Looking at this from the perspective of the Old Testament, I would say Jesus is a prophet performing a sign act -- depicting what God is getting ready to do with his people because of the corruption of their worship. As Jesus performs this sign act and announces to the people God's judgment on Jerusalem and the temple, he actually borrows some of Jeremiah's old material. Remember Jeremiah preached the Temple Sermon announcing the destruction of the temple. That's a pretty good sermon! So Jesus uses that expression that Jeremiah had used to describe the people in his day and said, “You have turned God's house into a den of robbers.” Jesus took that expression directly from the Old Testament, directly from the book of Jeremiah. What it shows us is that the same judgment that came on Judah in 586; this judgment of exile because of their unbelief, this judgment of exile because of their rejection of God's messenger -- they're going to experience that all over again. There is going to be another exile.

Richard Bauckham says that the destruction of the Jerusalem that's going to occur in 70 AD as you understand it from a biblical perspective is a second stage of the exile that occurred already in 586. So Jeremiah had preached the destruction of the temple, Jesus does exactly the same thing. In the message of Jeremiah, Jeremiah had said, think about Shiloh, and remember how God had judged Shiloh in the past. If God has judged Shiloh in the past, then he can judge Jerusalem in the present. I think Jesus is doing something very similar as he chases the temple money changers out, and then talks about the den of robbers from Jeremiah 7. He said, “Remember what happened in 586 BC, remember the fulfillment of the prophecies of Jeremiah, the same thing is about to happen to you in 70 AD.
In the account of the cleansing and the taking of the money changers and the cleansing of the temple in Mark 11 in that particular account, the cleansing of the temple is sandwiched between other events. It's where Jesus curses the fig tree. As you read the story in Mark 11 it kind of follows this progression: Jesus sees this barren fig tree; he curses it; he goes to the temple; and he performs the sign act there. Then, after that's over he explains to his disciples the significance of “why did you curse this tree?” We get the explanation from Jesus that this fig tree is representative of the spiritual barrenness of the people of Israel. If they had been rightly related to God, they would have rightly responded to God's message. Throughout Israel's history God has looked for the right kind of fruit from his people and the story of Jesus and how Israel responded to him is basically the same as the story of how Israel responded to God throughout the Old Testament.

It's interesting that he makes reference and he uses as his visual image of that fig tree, because we go back to Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 8 which again comes after Jeremiah 7. What’s in Jeremiah chapter 7? It's the Temple Sermon. It's the place where Jeremiah accuses them of turning the temple into a den of robbers. This is exactly what Jesus had said and here's the statement that Jeremiah makes in 8:13: “When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.” So Jeremiah had to announce the coming destruction of the temple because of the unbelief, the disobedience, and the fruitlessness of the people. Jesus comes to bring the fulfillment of the covenant promises that Jeremiah had promised. Yet he is born to pronounce a curse on Israel as well because they reflect the same spiritual condition that Jeremiah had encountered.

So as a result of this, Jesus who had been sent by God as the herald of salvation, has to become the prophet announcing God's judgment before that restoration can occur. Jesus begins to preach the destruction of the temple in the same way that Jeremiah did in his ministry. He tells the disciples in Matthew 24 as they look at the temple, “Not one stone that belongs to this place will be left
standing.” Jesus preaches his own “Temple Sermon.” And Jesus, just like Jeremiah, becomes a weeping prophet. He weeps and laments the destruction of Jerusalem and the people that are there. In Luke 13:34, he says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem that kills the prophets that God has repeatedly sent to you.” You can't read that verse without hearing, after all that we studied about Jeremiah, without hearing Jeremiah said, “O that my head were a fountain of tears. That I can weep over the destruction of my people.” You can't hear that passage where Jesus says, “You have repeatedly killed the prophets that I sent to you,” without hearing Jeremiah 7. The Lord says, “I have repeatedly, recurrently, sent my servants the prophets to you yet you have not listened.”

Understanding the Promise of Restoration

How do we understand the promises of restoration, the promises of kingdom, the promises of the last days, the promises of the new covenant that are found in Jeremiah in light of the New Testament. Those promises are now and not yet. And as followers of Jesus Christ because of his death for us, we experience the transformative blessings of that new covenant. Remember what they are. We have forgiveness for our past sins. We have enablement for the present and the future to live as God designs us to be.

But as God is working out salvation history there is a not yet component and we look forward to that as we think of the second coming of Jesus. We live in a time of already [now] but not yet. The new covenant blessings – what Jeremiah promised in this restoration – we are experiencing as God's people. But we're looking forward to the final restoration; we're looking forward to the time that God will complete everything that he promised to Jeremiah, to the people of Israel. We do that anticipating that the Lord will keep his promises that he will be faithful to what he's promised to his people. And we know that because of what God has already done for us in Christ in the ways that we have presently already begun to enjoy what Jeremiah promised when he spoke this new covenant that God provided for his people.
Session 27: Stages of Restoration (Jer 30-33) 543

Transcribed by Kristen Dunlap, Sophia Pellegrino, Emily Bartz, Isabella Isaac, Adam McFarland, Jeff Francois and edited by Rachel Lehmann
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Introduction

We are continuing to look at Jeremiah’s message of restoration for the people of Israel and beyond that to simply what he was saying to the people of that day and even to the people of Israel. What are the implications for Jeremiah’s message for the working out of salvation history? How do we understand the message of Jeremiah in light of the New Testament and what God is doing in the church today? Those are some things we are going to continue to explore in the second session talking about the stages of restoration.

Four Prophetic Predictions

We saw the idea in the last session that the kingdom promises that are given in the Prophets are promises that are experienced now, but yet they are promises that are in some sense unrealized, and not yet. The Prophets had four basic ideas about what God was going to do in this future restoration for the people of Israel. Number one, there was going to be a return to the land. Number two, there was going to be the rebuilding of the cities especially the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. Number three, there was going to be a new David to reign over the people. Number four, the blessings that God would give to Israel would extend to the nations. So as we come to the New Testament those things are being fulfilled in Christ. We have reached a stage of fulfillment where the kingdom of God has arrived but yet even though the kingdom has been inaugurated it has not yet been consummated.

Three Stages of Restoration

We talked about the three stages of restoration in our last session. The first stage of restoration was the return from exile that occurred when the people came back to the land after Cyrus issued the decree, Cyrus and the Persians defeated the Babylonians in 538. Shortly after that, Cyrus issued the decree saying that the
Jews could go back to Jerusalem, they could rebuild the temple, they could worship the Lord, and they could live in their land. That was the beginning of what Jeremiah had prophesied. Jeremiah had said in 70 years the Lord will bring the exiles back from Babylon. Stage two of that restoration though occurs with the first coming of Jesus as we come to the end of the prophetic era in the Old Testament. Then through the Inter-Testamental period to the end of the New Testament era, we saw that the conditions of exile were still in place for the people of Israel. They were still under oppression; they were still under bondage to foreigners; they were still under the more severe bondage to their sin. So Jesus comes in his first coming to bring into effect the promises that the prophets had made about Israel’s restoration and their return from exile. The now aspect of the new covenant that we enjoy as believers today is brought about by the cross and by the death of Jesus. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant; he gives us that prophesy in Jeremiah chapter 31 the fulfillment of how that new covenant comes into effect is through the death of Jesus.

Remember that when God had established a covenant with Israel, the old covenant, it was established by sacrificing by the sprinkling of blood on the people. There was a death that brought that old covenant into effect. There is a death that also brings the new covenant into effect and there were two primary things that were provided for us, there are two primary aspects of the new covenant blessings that have been given to us because of the death of Christ. Number one we have the radical forgiveness of sin that was promised that the Lord will no longer remember our sins because there has been a perfect sacrifice that has been offered for that we also have the spiritual enablement and the spiritual empowerment that comes from the new covenant as God writes his law on our hearts.

When we place the promise of Jeremiah 31 beside other prophesies in the Old Testament like Ezekiel 36 we understand that the writing of the law on the hearts, the spiritual enablement, comes from God pouring out his Spirit on his
people. On the night of the last supper as we read this passage in the last session Luke chapter 22 verse 20 Jesus says to the disciples “this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” So just as it was blood that established the old covenant with Israel in the time of Moses there is blood there is a sacrifice a far greater way and a far greater value that also brings the new covenant into effect as well.

The Book of Hebrews and Jeremiah

This is especially an idea of an aspect of the new covenant how this is all brought into effect by the death of Jesus. This is an idea that is especially important in the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews is going to teach about Jesus, he is our perfect high priest he has not simply offered animal sacrifices and animal blood for our sins, he has offered a more perfect sacrifice. He has not just served at the earthly tabernacle or the earthly temple that was only a shadow of the heavenly one by his sacrifice he has actually passed in the very presence of God in heaven and he has provided a perfect sacrifice as a perfect high priest. As a result of that perfect sacrifice he has affected and inaugurated for us a new covenant relationship with God that is vastly superior to the old covenant that was associated with the Levites, the animal sacrifices, the earthly tabernacle and even the temple in Jerusalem. So Jesus has offered a perfect sacrifice he is a perfect high priest and so in Hebrews chapter 8 verse 7 it says, “for if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says:”

Then the book of Hebrews chapter 8 verses 8 to 12 gives us a quotation of Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34. In fact, this is the longest quotation of the Old Testament in any part of the New Testament. So it was a passage that was obviously important to the early church and obviously significant to the writer of the book of Hebrews. What Jeremiah promised to the people of Israel is what we experience as the church today, those blessings have come into affect. There are not two new covenants there are not two peoples of God. We enjoy the blessings
of the new covenant that God promised through the prophets because of the work of Jesus.

There is this lengthy quote in Hebrews chapter 8 from Jeremiah 31 that makes this point, I think, crystal clear. You can directly connect what Jeremiah promised to the people of Israel to what we have as believers in Jesus Christ today. Why is that a possibility? It’s because of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. Hebrews chapter 10 verses 10 to 14 are going to return to that same idea. Here is what it says there “And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” What was true about the sacrifices of the Old Testament, they had to be offered on a recurring basis. The Day of Atonement and the sacrifices the sin offering for both the priests and the people had to be offered on a yearly basis, and if that yearly sacrifice was not carried out there was no atonement. The people would not be allowed to live in the presence of God unless that sin was dealt with on a recurring basis. So Jesus offered a superior sacrifice because he only offered it one time. Hebrews says, “and every priest stands daily at his service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins.” There was atonement in the Old Testament but in a real sense animal sacrifices could not fully resolve the sin issue. They could not fully affect that radical forgiveness that was promised by the new covenant. They could not bring the spiritual enablement that would come about as the death of Christ brings the love of God to bear in our hearts. It brings about the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus death accomplishes something that the old covenant and those old sacrifices could never accomplish.

It says in chapter 10, verse 12, “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies shall be made a footstool for his feet.” So the kingdom promises have been initiated and inaugurated by the death of Jesus. Jesus by his death and then his resurrection and then his ascension, where he has taken up his position at the right hand of the father, he is ruling at God’s right hand. He has
entered into a new aspect of his kingdom rule because of the perfect work he did for us on the cross.

There is a new aspect of God’s kingdom that has come about as a result of the work of Jesus. So the Bible can talk about God’s kingdom in a couple of different ways. It can speak of the fact that God’s kingdom is forever lasting. He’s a sovereign king he does whatever he pleases, and that has been true from the very beginning of time before there was even the world. It always has been, it always will be, it is in the present. But the Bible can also speak of God’s kingdom as something that is new, something that was an eschatological but in that era of God inaugurating and initiating his kingdom rule in a new way, was accomplished through the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Then he says “for by a single offering he is perfected for all time, those who are being sanctified.” The Holy Spirit also bears witness to us saying, “this is the covenant that I will make with them after these days.” And again Hebrews chapter 10 gives us a long and a lengthy quotation of Jeremiah 31 verses 31-34. So Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant is not just important to the theology of the book of Jeremiah, it’s not just important to the message of the prophets in the Old Testament, it’s a key passage for helping us to understand what Jesus accomplished for us through his death. This enablement, this empowerment, this transformation that the new covenant has brought about, is something that we are already experiencing in Jesus.

The argument of the writer of Hebrews is that Hebrews was written to a group of people who were thinking of going back to their old Jewish ways, back to the sacrifices, back to the Mosaic Law, and back to the earthly temple. All of these things that were associated with the Old covenant. And what the writer of Hebrews is saying, why would you ever want to go back to the old covenant when you were already experiencing the eschatological blessings of the new covenant? Why do you want to go back to animal sacrifices when you have the empowering perfecting sacrifice of Jesus that has brought this new covenant into effect? Why do you want to go back to the old covenant in the Mosaic Law and the defeat and
death that brought when we have life where God has written his law on our hearts and we can live for him?

So the quotations of Jeremiah 31 are very important to the argument of the book of Hebrews to say, here’s why Jesus is so important to us. Here’s why we don’t want to go back to the old covenant. Jesus is a perfect high priest who has brought these blessings of radical forgiveness, empowerment and enablement. There is no reason why we would ever want to go back there. And so we think about these new blessings of the new covenant that we’re experiencing. This is how God has transformed our lives. As we preach the gospel and as we share Christ with people and as we see the spiritual transformation that God brings about in people’s lives—that’s the reality of the new covenant; that’s the power that Jesus has to change lives because he’s bringing into effect precisely what Jeremiah had promised.

So there is an important connection in the theology of the New Testament between the promise of the new covenant by Jeremiah and the realization or the implementation or the inauguration of the blessings of that covenant through the death of Jesus. Stage 1 was their return from exile. Stage 2, Jesus comes to announce the blessings of the kingdom, the blessings of restoration. And he brings that about through his perfect sacrifice and his perfect death.

Jesus, Jeremiah, Isaiah and the Cross

As we’re thinking about that, there’s another connection between Jesus, Jeremiah and the cross that I find absolutely fascinating and that I’d like to talk about for just a couple of minutes. Now, in order to help us to see this further connection between Jesus, Jeremiah and the cross we have to bring into this and into the discussion the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah talked about a servant of the Lord, and he talks about an individual servant of the Lord who would be the one whose mission would be to save and restore Israel as the national servant of the Lord. In the theology of Isaiah, God had made Israel his servant nation to proclaim and declare his glory to the nations but they had failed in their mission as
God’s servant. Isaiah says in chapter 42 “my people Israel; they are blind and a deaf servant.” They were supposed to lead the other nations to God, yet often they couldn’t even find their own way to God. Instead of reflecting God to the nations through their obedience to the law, they became disobedient and so there has to be in the theology of Isaiah, the failure of the national servant requires an individual servant who will restore the covenant relationship between God and Israel. This individual servant is focused on in the book of Isaiah in a series of what are called the Servant Songs. And those servant songs are found in chapter 42, chapter 49 chapter 50 and chapter 53. As Christians we’re all generally familiar with the passage of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. How would this individual servant fulfill his mission? How would he restore the national servant? How would he bring about their forgiveness and deal with their sin problem? Well, ultimately what chapter 53 says is that this individual servant to fulfill the mission that God had given to him to restore the people he would have to die and he would have to offer his own life as a sin offering for the people. God was pleased to crush him and to put him through this suffering so that he might bring about the salvation of the people of Israel. Isaiah 53:6 says, “all we, the people of Israel, we have gone astray and all of we like sheep have turned to our own way but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” As this righteous servant who was completely innocent himself of any wrongdoing offers himself for the people of Israel, God accepts him as a sin offering for the people and his death ultimately brings about the restoration of the national servant.

Now you might be saying I thought we were talking about Jeremiah and the new covenant, why do we get lost here with Isaiah and the suffering servant? Well, just a couple of other things. As we think about the servant in the book of Isaiah the question is raised, “Who is this servant?” How do we know him, how do we recognize him? As Christians we immediately think the suffering servant is Jesus. Isaiah 53 is a prophecy about the cross. Acts chapter 8 when the Ethiopian unit reads that passage and Philip explains it to him, he says let me tell you this is
how it’s fulfilled in Jesus. We understand Jesus is the suffering servant. But as you go back to the book of Isaiah and you look at this in the context of that prophecy the identity of that servant is not really clear. It’s somewhat mysterious. We can sort of see him as if we’re looking through a soft camera lens and we can see the shadows and the silhouette but the exact identity of this figure is not that clear from the book of Isaiah itself. Remember the Ethiopian eunuch Acts chapter 8 when he’s reading this passage asks: who is this talking about? Is it about Isaiah, is it about someone else? As I read Isaiah that question arises as well.

Someone said that the way that the suffering servant is described in Isaiah is he’s presented as a new Moses and he fulfills these different roles as prophet, priest and king. Ultimately this is going to be fulfilled in Jesus but as this person is described in Isaiah, one person has described it this way, “the Lord presents this figure that is going to come and save Israel and in a sense as he’s describing him he leaves an open job description. It was almost like a help wanted sign hanging in the second half of Isaiah. Who is this figure that is going to be this servant? Who is going to be this new Moses that restores the people that performs this role of prophet, priest, and king and brings about this new Exodus and deliverance and restoration that the prophets talked about?

As this whole idea of the individual servant begins to work out; as this open job description is placed there, help wanted, Israel needs a deliverer and the Old Testament begins to seem like there are various individuals who carry out this role. In some ways the prophet Isaiah himself is a servant like figure and he’s the prophetic herald who announces the Lord, the time of God’s favor is coming, release for the prisoners. Isaiah himself in some sense is a servant like figure.

Jeremiah as the Lord’s servant

But as we come to the book of Jeremiah, we’re finally back to Jeremiah here, here is where I was going. Jeremiah in many ways as a prophet, as he fulfills his prophetic commission and his calling by God, he resembles for us, very closely, the servant of the Lord that his described, this individual servant who
suffers in the fulfillment of his mission. Remember, the servant songs in Isaiah 42, 49, 50 and 53, in the servant song in Isaiah 50 verses 4-9 it tells us that the individual servant is going to be obedient to God, he’s going to be faithful to his calling, which immediately provides a direct contact between him and the nation. He is going to give his back to be beaten and he is going to be shamed and then vindicated. So we have a prophet who is called by God, fulfilling his mission, his back is beaten, he’s shamed and then God ultimately vindicates him.

We all missed here the echoes of Jeremiah chapter 20. Jeremiah preaches the message, the need for submission to Babylon, he reminds the people of their covenant of faithfulness, the sins that they have committed. It tells us in Jeremiah 20, because of that, he is arrested and a priest by the name of Passhur beats Jeremiah and throws him into prison. It looks like who’s going to answer this open job description? Well, Jeremiah has so far.

Isaiah 53 in that great passage about the suffering servant in a wonderful Old Testament passage reminding us of us what Jesus would do for us. Here’s a description of the servant Isaiah 53 verses 7 and 8, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that before it shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” If this is the open job description of the suffering servant, if I was reading this, this would not be a job that I would want to apply for. And in many ways as God gave Jeremiah his calling and Jeremiah began to realize what all that calling involved, it was a job description he wasn’t necessarily all that ready for as well.

But the terminology that is used here to describe the suffering servant is going to be used to describe the suffering of Jeremiah. Notice it says that, “he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and he is cut off from the land of the living.” In Jeremiah chapter 11 in verse 19 as Jeremiah is praying one of his laments and one of his confessions to the Lord, he’s talking about his calling and all the suffering and abuse he’s encountered and this passage he’s talking about the fact that the people in his own home town of Anathoth are wanting to put him to death and
Jeremiah describes himself like this, he says, “I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes saying, ‘let us destroy the tree with its fruit and let us cut him off from the land of the living.’” So the idea of the lamb being led to the slaughter, being cut off from the land of the living, that terminology that’s used with reference to the servant in Isaiah 53 is used with reference to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 11. We’re not going to get into the critical issues about which text came first and the date of Isaiah and all that, I simply want us to understand this that in this open job description that’s given about a suffering servant that is going to ultimately restore his people. Jeremiah in many ways seems to fulfill that role. But we know and we understand that Jeremiah is ultimately not the one who is going to bring about the restoration that was promised by the prophets. Jeremiah definitely answers the job description. He is faithful to the calling that God puts upon him.

Like the servant he gives his back to be beaten, he is shamed, he is persecuted, he’s opposed, he’s suffered, like a lamb he’s led, but the ultimate work of the servant was not accomplished by Jeremiah. There has to be someone who comes after Jeremiah who is going to answer and fulfill that job description in a much greater way, Jeremiah suffers persecution and poetically he’s led like a lamb to the slaughter. The intention of his enemies is to put him to death and to cut him off from the land of the living. Jesus answers that job description all the way. What was poetically true of Jeremiah is really and literally true of Jesus--he is the lamb that is led to the slaughter in the way that Jeremiah never could because Jeremiah himself is a sinful Israelite. So the Lord provides that sin offering and atonement. He’s the sinless one on whom the sins of the people are placed. He’s the one that God crushes and he’s the one that becomes the sin offering so that he might restore the people. He can do that because he is sinless in every way. Jeremiah was a servant of the Lord who anticipates and prefigures for us, the ultimate suffering servant, but Jesus was a more perfect suffering servant.

Isaiah 53:7 says “that as the ultimate suffering servant, this individual who
restores Israel did not open his mouth and did not complain about his suffering. Well when I remember the confessions of Jeremiah and Jeremiah chapters 11-20, Jeremiah definitely opened his mouth at times and we saw he was righteous in doing so but he doesn’t completely fulfill what Isaiah 53 is looking for. Isaiah 53:12 says that the suffering servant ultimately will intercede for many. As a result of that he’s going to be the one that by his death brings the people back to God, just what we’ve seen about the new covenant and the death of Jesus in the book of Hebrews, he will effectively intercede for many. Remember what God had said to Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 16, 11, 14; 14:11 and 15:1-- do not intercede for these people, do not pray for them. So Jeremiah by the suffering in the opposition that he encounters and really by the message of hope that he gives to the people, the suffering servant is going to bring the healing of Israel “by his stripes we are healed.”

Jeremiah is going to announce in the Book of Consolation that there is going to be healing and medicine for those for whom there was no healing but Jeremiah cannot fully carry that out. He is promising a restoration that from his perspective is still future because his life only anticipates the perfect servant and the perfect sacrifice that he would make.

When that sacrifice comes, then the blessings of the new covenant can become a reality. That’s what we experience because of what Jesus has done for us and as we preach the gospel and as we see people’s lives changed, as we see people who have struggles with addiction, or people who have struggles with sexual orientation or sexual sin, whether it’s heterosexual or homosexual. As we see people who deal with struggles with alcohol or problems in their marriage or greed or selfishness; as we see their lives being transformed we’re reminded of how God writes the law on the heart of his people. As we see that transformation coming about in our own lives and the way that God has changed me and continues to change me, I’ve been a Christian for 40 years and there are so many other ways that I need to be changed but the power of the new covenant is real
because the perfect servant has offered that sacrifice that brings the people back to God. The death that was required to affect the new covenant that Jeremiah promised has already happened.

**II Corinthians 2 and the New Covenant**

And in the New Testament as we look at all of this, probably my favorite passage about just the enablement or the empowerment of ministry is related to Jeremiah’s promise of the new covenant and that passage is found in II Corinthians chapter 2. Paul raises a question as an apostle and a missionary that I think that if you’re a pastor or a teacher or a Christian worker or even just as believers we think about living our lives out, it’s a question that should come to mind every once in a while. Paul says, “As I think about the incredible responsibility of preaching the gospel, as I think about the awesome eternal life and death implications of the ministry and the message and the calling that I’ve been given by God, remember the prophets being called as watchmen and the awesome responsibility of that. Paul senses that same kind of obligation, that same kind of responsibly, before God as he thinks of his ministry as an apostle and he raises this question, he says, “who could possibly be sufficient for these things?” As I think about my responsibility, as a missionary, as an apostle, to preach this gospel and this gospel has eternal life and death implications, who is sufficient for these things? Who could possibly in and of themselves carry this commission out or bring about the changes in people’s lives that God desires to bring? The obvious answer to that question is none of us are sufficient for these things in ourselves. But here’s the incredible promise of the new covenant that as the new covenant promises and blessings begin to work in our lives, and begin to work in the lives of the people that we minister to, God is the one who makes us sufficient.

Paul goes on to say in II Corinthians chapter 3, verses 4-6, our sufficiency comes from God. And the sufficiency that God provides through Jesus Christ is connected to those promises that Jeremiah made to the people of Israel and Judah back in Jeremiah chapter 31. Paul speaks about the power of the new covenant in
the lives of the people that he’s ministered to and reminds the Corinthians of what the new covenant has done in their lives. We think about all the problems and issues that were there with the Corinthian church, Paul could still look at their lives and see the transforming power of the gospel, I see the transforming effect of the new covenant in your lives and here’s what he says, “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again,” this is the beginning of chapter 3, “Or do we need as some do letters of recommendation to you, or from you?” Paul’s ministry was being challenged by many in the Corinthian church and he says, “Okay, let’s think about my credentials. Do I need to give you external letters and three letters of reference showing you that I’m valid apostle of Jesus? He says think about this, he says we don’t need those kinds of letters of recommendation because in verse 2, “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation.” You know, what reference letter does Paul need to validate his ministry that changed lives of the people that have come under the hearing of the gospel through his ministry. And he says, “You are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.” I can’t help but hear the echoes of God’s promise that he was going to write the law of the heart on his people. But in this passage, changing the image just a little bit, and thinking about the transformation that has come about in his own life, Paul says, “You yourselves are written on our hearts.” The new covenant and what God has done in my life has enabled me to love you in this way and I see in your lives the effect of the new covenant as well.” He goes on dealing with the same imagery and he says, “And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.” The transformation that has come about in your life is reflected through the power of the Spirit and this letter, this commendation letter, that is based on your lives, reflects the power of the working of the Holy Spirit that was promised by the new covenant and that’s been written on our hearts because the new covenant has transformed us as well.
Already, but not yet

So there is a now and a not yet aspect to the new covenant and the kingdom promises that Jeremiah gave to us. Stage 1 remember, was the return from exile. Stage 2 is brought about by the first coming of Jesus and inaugurated by the death of Christ. As believers in Jesus we’re experiencing those blessings and benefits now. There are not two new covenants. There’s not a new covenant that God has made with the church today and a new covenant that God’s going to make with Israel in the future. There is one new covenant and we are experiencing the blessings of that right now.

Who is the Recipient of the New Covenant

Now all this is going to raise another interpretive issue we keep raising more problems and more questions as we work through the theology of this. The present enjoyment of the new covenant by followers of Jesus raises for me an interesting question. I want to go back to Jeremiah 31 verse 31, “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” Who specifically is the recipient of the new covenant. It is the house of Israel and the house of Judah so the question is here’s my issue, my question, “if we are not Jewish and I am not Jewish, I don’t belong to the house of Israel or the house of Judah, how do we get in on the blessings of what God had promised to Israel?” New covenant promise, house of Israel, house of Judah, is it just for Israel? I think we have to understand when we’ve moved forward from the Old Testament to the New Testament, I think now we need to step back and go from Jeremiah backward to the rest of the history of the Old Testament and God’s entire covenantal program. What God is doing in the New Covenant ultimately goes back to and brings about a fulfillment of what God has promised in all of the other covenants that were apart of the salvation history of the Old Testament. The new covenant that God is promising for Israel and Judah in the book of Jeremiah and in other prophetic texts is related to all of the other covenant promises that God made with Israel prior to this. You see the different covenants in the Old Testament are not, here’s one covenant, it’s
isolated, it’s its own thing; here’s another covenant, God’s going to do something else, there’s a third covenant God changes his strategy. Really all of the covenants are ultimately in or related to each other and they’re part of one plan and one program. They ultimately funnel into each other and ultimately they funnel into Jesus.

New Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant

The new covenant promise that God made to Israel ultimately goes back to the covenant that God made with Abraham. Remember the covenant promises that God gave to Abraham? He said, “I’m going to make you a great nation, I’m going to give you a land, and through you all the nations on earth will be blessed.” God’s design and God’s intention in the Abrahamic covenant that precedes the new covenant is that all of the blessings that God would give to the people of Israel were ultimately to become a source and an instrument of blessing to the world as a whole and to the nations.

God’s design was always to use Abraham, Israel as Abraham’s descendants, to bring and to be the instrument of his blessing. They were going to be a kingdom of priests. They would mediate those blessings to all of the other nations. We, as the church today, as followers of Jesus, we get into the blessings of the new covenant because of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant. Let me repeat that again. We get into the blessings of the new covenant because of the promises that are in the Abrahamic covenant. If Jesus is the seed of Abraham, as Galatians chapter 3 says that he is, and if Jesus is ultimately the one through whom the Abrahamic covenantal promises are fulfilled, then we come through that covenantal promise into the blessings and benefits of the new covenant that are promised by Jeremiah.

The Abrahamic covenant says, “in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The blessing that is specifically given through the new covenant promised by Jeremiah, radical forgiveness of their past sin and enablement and empowerment for the future. Through the Abrahamic covenant, those promises are
given to those who are followers of Jesus. All these covenants ultimately find their fulfillment in Christ and as we are in Christ, we become the recipient of those benefits and blessings.

Stage 3: Ultimate Fulfillment

Hopefully that helps to answer that issue. How do we as Gentiles, how do we get into the Jeremiah 31:31 promises? It’s through the agency of the Abrahamic covenant. But that raises another issue for us. Keep dealing with the issues and the questions here. The mention of Abraham and Israel and the Old Testament covenants and specifically the statement in Jeremiah 31 that God is making this new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah reminds us that there is finally a stage 3 to the restoration and the kingdom promises. We spent a lot of time talking about stage 1 and the return from Exile. We’ve talked about stage 2 and the beginning of the kingdom and the beginning and the implementation inauguration of the covenant blessings through the first coming of Jesus and how those benefits are made real in our lives and transform our lives through the death of Christ. But there is a stage 3 to the fulfillment of God’s kingdom promises that completes salvation history and fully brings into affect all of the blessings of the kingdom; all of the eschatological blessings that God had promised through the Old Testament prophets. Stage 2 has occurred for us at the first coming of Jesus. It becomes real in your life individually when you believe and trust and appropriate what Christ has done for you.

Stage 3 is the final consummation of these new covenant kingdom restoration promises from Jeremiah in the Old Testament prophets that will finally occur at the second coming of Jesus. I believe stage 3 is going to involve several important things. Number one, the kingdom of God will fully be established as Jesus comes to rule and reign. He entered into a new phase and a new aspect of his kingdom rule through his death, resurrection, ascension, and connection with his first coming. But we’re still waiting for the full final manifestation of the kingdom of God and that will occur at his second coming. We can read about that in
Revelation 19, Jesus comes back as a powerful warrior, he destroys his enemies, he brings about a final judgment and then he establishes a kingdom of peace that’s described for us in Revelation chapter 20.

A second thing that is going to happen in stage 3 of the implementation of the new covenant and restoration promises is that the law of God will finally and fully be written on the hearts of his people and even our very ability to sin will be taken away from us. Through the death of Jesus, we have this new enablement. The law of God has been written on our hearts, the Spirit has been put within us and we have the desire and the internal enablement, and the empowerment by God to live out the life that God wants us to live. II Peter 1 says, “We have been given everything that’s needed for life and godliness.” But Romans chapter 7 reminds us that there’s another law at work in our lives and it’s the law of sin and the reality of our sin nature. We’re still living with that and that’s why in one of our earlier sessions we talked about the fact that John Goldingay says “when you look at the life of believers in the New Testament sometimes they don’t seem all that different from the lives of people in the Old. It’s because we’re still dealing with and wrestling with and struggling with the problem of sin and that’s going to be there until the time that the kingdom comes in its full manifestation and God transforms us completely so that we no longer live in mortal bodies that have to wrestle and struggle with sin. That’s part of stage three as well.

Restoration of Israel

But I also believe, and I know that there are really good biblical scholars that would disagree with this or that have other ideas or perspectives, but I also believe that stage 3 of this fulfillment is the final manifestation of the kingdom of God, the final recognition and fulfillment and realization of the covenant promises and the restoration that was envisioned by the Old Testament prophets is also going to mean the restoration of God’s people, Israel. I believe that the specific covenant promises that God has given to the people of Israel and the specific things and ways that God is working in and through the people of Israel, they are
so important to salvation history that those specific promises that God has given to
the people of Israel are also going to find their fulfillment in that final
consummation. Again we obviously have varying opinions about this in the church
and there are different theological systems.

Theological Systems: Israel or the Church

It’s not a test of spirituality, what you believe about these particular issues;
but we have some theological systems that want to stress for us that the promises
of restoration that are given through the prophets are spiritually fulfilled and
figuratively fulfilled in and through the church. We have other theological systems
that have stressed that the kingdom promises to Israel are going to be literally
fulfilled in the people and nation of Israel and sometimes to varying degrees of
how rigid and how fully do we see that implemented? So we have these two
different systems, some say the kingdom promises that God gave to Jeremiah and
to the other prophets; they are figuratively fulfilled in the church. Other
theologically systems that say, “No, they’re going to be literally fulfilled through
the people of Israel.” My understanding as I have come to read the Old and the
New Testament together is that this is not an either/or question. It’s not simply a
question of it will either be fulfilled figuratively and spiritually in the church or
literally in a real way in the people of Israel. I think it is a both/and. Salvation
history involves that in the present aspect of God’s kingdom, in the “now” part of
this and what we experience of the new covenant because of what Jesus
accomplished through his death, we are experiencing the blessings of the new
covenant and the promises to Israel are being fulfilled figuratively in the church
today. We have become the new Israel. Philippians chapter 3 says, “We are the
ture circumcision. The twelve apostles that Jesus appointed, in some way,
represent for us a new beginning for the people of God. There is one people of
God, not two people of God and there’s one new covenant, not two new
covenants. And so we are experiencing the blessings of the new covenant and of
the kingdom in a figurative way.
But I believe that the promises that God has made to Israel are such an important part of salvation history that God’s covenant faithfulness demands that he keep those promises to the people of Israel as well. All the way back in Genesis chapter 12 God began to work through the instrumentality of Israel. I believe the Israel specific aspect of salvation history carries through to the very end. So I believe that these promises of restoration that God gave to the people of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah about their land, about their return, those things are so important, they’re so inbreed in the message of the Old Testament, it’s something that you hear again and again and again. They are so important to the story of what God is doing in bringing his kingdom to earth that they are not simply spiritually fulfilled in the church. Those promises are going to be fulfilled as God works to bring about the restoration of the people of Israel themselves.

God’s Promises to Israel

I want to go back to Jeremiah and highlight a few places where we begin to understand how important the specific commitment that God has made to Israel, how important this is in the mind of God, and how important these specific covenant promises that God has made to Israel. How much do they play into the message of the prophets? The answer we get is that they have huge importance. Listen to what God says about Israel, Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 35-37, “Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar--the Lord of hosts is His name: If this fixed order departs…” What fixed order are we talking about? The fixed order that we observe every morning when the sun comes up and then when the night comes, that cycle, that constantly repeats itself. I never go to bed at night and wonder if the sun is going to come up tomorrow because God has established this order and it’s fixed. He says, “If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.” So God has made a commitment, in a sense, there’s a covenant anchor here that I believe God has sworn himself to forever. He
says, “how committed am I to the people of Israel, how committed am I to fulfilling the specific covenant promises that I made to them. I am as committed to that as I am to the sun that comes up every morning and the stars and the moon that come out every night. It is a fixed thing that I have sworn myself to fulfill.”

So I believe that there is a restoration for Israel that awaits stage 3. Not just because I believe that we need to read and interpret the prophets in a hyper-literal way and sometimes do injustice to the metaphors and the figures that are there, but because I believe that there are covenantal promises that underlie what God is going to do for Israel, what the prophets are saying that the Lord will do for Israel, and those covenantal promises remain in effect.

Hanamel and the Land (Jer 32)

Think about the promise of the land and how important that is to the people of Israel. In Jeremiah chapter 32 in the mist of these restoration promises there is a reminder of how much land is a specific part of those restoration promises. Jeremiah performs a sign act in Jeremiah chapter 32. It is directly related to the covenantal promise of land. Jeremiah is directed to go and to redeem back the property of his relative Hanamel, and you know he’s following Old Testament custom here. Whenever a relative had to sell land it was your obligation to purchase it back and to make sure that it stayed within family hands. The Lord did not want families to lose their land, that was their heritage from the Lord. So Jeremiah goes and he carries this out and they sign the title deeds and there’s a real emphasis on making sure that there’s a written document here that confirms that this land belongs to Jeremiah and his family. But there’s a deeper significance behind all of this than simply fulfilling a family obligation. Jeremiah carries out this sign act at the time when the Babylonians are getting ready to take the land and so the question that arises in Jeremiah 32 is: why purchase the land and why pay this money and why make this investment and why go through this process where you write out the two copies of the deeds and you seal one up and you keep one open and you put them in jars to make sure that they’re preserved? Why do all
of that?’ Well the answer is: is because God has made a specific promise to his people that he is going to bring them back to that land. That was part of the covenant that God had established with Israel and I believe that even as we move into the New Testament in Romans 4:13 Paul says that God’s people are going to be heirs of the entire earth. We’ve been given a titled deed to the entire land or the entire earth because all of it belongs to Jesus, every square inch of it. But part of that covenant and part of salvation history and part of the way that God is going to work that out is by fulfilling the specific covenant promises that God has made to Israel.

Romans 9-11

So we have clues and hints and indicators that lead us to that conclusion in the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament and then we have an important anchor passage in the New Testament as well. In Romans chapter 9 to 11 where Paul is going to reflect on God’s covenantal promises and God’s covenantal commitment to the people of Israel, this focus is on the ethnic people, the focus of Romans 9 to 11 is clearly on the ethnic people of Israel. Paul says, “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they be saved.” He’s talking about ethnic Jews. He’s talking about the people of Israel and I believe the term Israel is going to have that meaning need throughout Romans 9 to 11. The theological point that Paul establishes in Romans 9 to 11 is that Israel’s unbelief throughout its history has not invalidated God’s covenant promises—they remain in effect.

Paul says that God is fulfilling the covenant promises that he has made to Israel in two specific ways. Those promises are going to be fulfilled. Number one, there is a remnant of grace among the Jewish people who are coming to Christ in the present age and they become a part of the church and just like throughout Israel’s history there’s always been a remnant of believers that were part of the true people of God. There are Jewish people coming to know Jesus in the present era and through God’s grace God is fulfilling his covenant promises, as they come to enjoy the blessings of the new covenant.
But Paul goes on to say that beyond that, a second way that God will fulfill his covenant promises to Israel is that in the future after this time of national blinding is over and in connection with the time when Jesus will prepare to come back and in connection with the restoration of all things in the end times, there is going to be a national turning of the people of God to Israel. Paul has this to say in Romans chapter 11, verse 26, “and in this way, all Israel shall be saved, as it is written. ‘The deliverer will come up from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’” The Lord says there’s going to be a turning of the people of Israel. There is going to be a salvation that’s given to the people of Israel where those that are left after all the judgments and the things that will happen in the end times, God is going to bring about a restoration of Israel. We can debate about the fact, whether this involves a kingdom and a national entity and all the things that are envisioned by the prophets, or whether it simply talks about a turning spiritually of the Jewish people to God. That’s not really the important issue but the reminder is and what is important is: God keeps his covenant promises.

Why does it matter to us?

Just one final reflection and we’ll close this. Why does this matter? Why does this matter to us? What importance do we really attach to all of this? I want to remind you of what Paul says to us as believers in Romans chapter 8, he says, “We have been chosen by God, we have been elected, we have been justified ultimately we are going to be glorified. He has called us, we are God’s people, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.” Immediately after the time that Paul talks about the fact that nothing can separate us from the love of God, the next issue that he is immediately going to address is God’s everlasting commitment to Israel. How can I know as a follower of Jesus that nothing will ever separate me from the love of God? All I need to do is look at God’s abiding commitment to Israel.
The prophet Jeremiah promised a new covenant. The Old Testament prophets promised a future kingdom in which there would be a return to the land; there would be the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple; there would be a new David; and there would be the inclusion of the nations. As we work our way through the story of salvation history in the New Testament, we understand those promises are being fulfilled in stages. Stage 1 is the return to the land. Stage 2 is the coming of Jesus at his first coming where he brings the new covenant into effect. Stage 3 is the future restoration where our salvation will be made complete, where God’s kingdom will come to earth and God’s covenant promises to Israel will also be fulfilled as a part of that restoration.
Introduction: Structural Review

In our final two sessions of the book Jeremiah, we’re going to be looking at the third major section of the book in chapters 46-51, dealing with Jeremiah’s “Oracles against the Nations.” Remember that the book of Jeremiah divides up into 3 major sections. In chapters 1-25, we have Jeremiah’s messages of judgment against Judah in Jerusalem, the warnings of the exile that is going to come, the destruction that God is going to bring against the people if they do not repent or change their ways. In chapter 26-45, we have the stories and the account of Judah’s rejection of the prophetic word, along with that message of judgment which is focusing on how many different individuals within the nation of Judah have rejected the word of the Lord, the persecution and opposition that Jeremiah encountered and experienced as he preached the word. We also have the promise section in chapters 30-33 about the restoration of Israel and God’s future plans to bring the people back to the land. The third and final section of the book of Jeremiah are the oracles that Jeremiah prophesized against the nations that surround Israel.

Remember that in his commission Jeremiah is called to be a prophet to the nations. So, that role is definitely the primary focus in Jeremiah chapter 46-51. Remember that we have two different versions of the book of Jeremiah; we have the version that is reflected in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. We also have the Hebrew tradition that’s reflected in the Hebrew MT [Masoretic Text]. In the Septuagint [LXX] Greek version which may represent an earlier form of the book of Jeremiah these oracles against the nations occur after chapter 25 verse 12 and so they’re in the middle of the book. In the Masoretic edition they come at the end and I think one thing that we see about the placement
of these oracles at the end; it reflects more the basic chronology of what Jeremiah is laying out. First of all, God is going to bring his judgment against his own people and then God will bring his judgment against the nations.

As you read chapters 46-51 you should also keep in mind the end to section 1 in Jeremiah 25 where Jeremiah talks about the cup of God’s wrath and God’s anger. All the nations of the earth are going to drink the cup of God’s wrath, they’re going to stagger under its intoxicating power and Judah is included among those nations. But what’s part of that sequence as well is that after God has judged the nations, after God has executed judgment against his own people, Judah, the final judgment and the culminating judgment is going to fall on Babylon. The Masoretic tradition that has these oracles at the end of the book reflects that as well because ultimately the conclusion to this book is the judgment against Babylon in chapters 50 and 51 along with the appendix giving us another account of the story of the fall of Jerusalem.

Remember as we’ve worked our way through this book. We’ve also seen that Jeremiah in many ways has a lot of shocking things to say about the role that Babylon is going to play in carrying out God’s judgment, in executing God’s plan, in connection with this message of judgment that Jeremiah is preaching. In some ways what Jeremiah says about Babylon is not just shocking but seems to be subversive. He was accused by his own people of being a traitor or weakening the war effort in the resistance against Babylon. When we see the kinds of things Jeremiah was saying about Babylon we understand why that’s true.

Nebuchadnezzar as God’s Servant

Jeremiah was saying that God had appointed Nebuchadnezzar as his servant to carry out judgment on the people of Judah. One of the ways that Babylon is described in the oracles in 50 and 51 is this idea that Babylon is the hammer of the entire earth. Nebuchadnezzar is Gods servant, God has given dominion over the nations to Babylon, the Jews that are living in Babylon are told to pray for the peace of Babylon the way that in the past they have prayed for the peace of
Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar has taken the place of David as God’s appointed and anointed vice-regent.

So, Jeremiah has these subversive things to say about the role that the Babylonians are playing. God is actually fighting holy war against his own people by fighting with the Babylonians. But remember Jeremiah is not saying these things because he’s simply pro-Babylonian; Jeremiah is not saying these things because he’s a traitor. Jeremiah is trying to give the people a theo-political understanding of what they’re going through and a recognition that the issues that they are dealing with are not political; they are not a military problem that needs to get resolved; it’s ultimately a spiritual issue. Judah’s major problem is not that they’re having to deal with the Babylonians. Judah’s major problem is there is something wrong with their relationship with God. If they do not turn from their sinful ways, God is going to use Babylon as an instrument of judgment.

Oracles against the Nations in the Other Prophets

But in the end of the book as we come to chapters 46-51 the focus on the judgment of God’s people transforms into a focus on the judgment of these nations that surround Israel and Judah. As we look at Jeremiah, one of the things we notice in light of other prophetic books is that these oracles against the nations are an important part of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. All of the Major Prophets have sections of oracles where the prophet is speaking of God’s judgment against the nations. In the book of Isaiah we have these kinds of oracles in chapters 13 to 23. In the book of Ezekiel we have oracles against the nations in the middle of the book in chapters 25-32 that come right before the extended section where Ezekiel is going to describe the restoration of Israel. Here in Jeremiah in chapters 46-51 in the Hebrew version of the book. In the Minor Prophets we have oracles against the nations in the opening two chapters of the book of Amos. The book of Obadiah, the entire prophetic book is a judgment speech against the people of Edom. It’s a prophetic book, a very brief message that in many ways parallels the message the Jeremiah gives against Edom in Jeremiah
chapter 49 and the literary issues of common sources come up in that discussion. Another Minor Prophet that is an oracle against a foreign nation is the book of Nahum, where God announces his judgment on the people of Nineveh and the Assyrian empire for all of the cruelty and violence that they have done. So oracles against the nations are not just a part of the book of Jeremiah, they are a part of the Old Testament prophetic tradition in general.

Now this is part of Jeremiah’s mission because he has been appointed by God as a prophet to the nations. But that does not necessarily mean and these oracles against the nations do not mean that the Old Testament prophets did road trips and they went out and “I’m going to do some guest appearances in Babylon and here’s what I’m going to let these people know.” For the most part these messages seem to be directed to the people of Israel themselves. They are messages about these other foreign nations, but except in rare occurrences I don’t think the prophets normally went to these places and delivered these messages. If they did they probably had to quickly leave town afterwards.

Now one exception to that is Jonah who actually is commissioned by God to go to Nineveh and preach there and in part, Jonah’s resistance to that is; this is not normally the way it works, even when a prophet is preaching about foreign nations. You don’t normally go there, and Jonah’s objection is not just the fact that he’s going to have to preach judgment against them and they might get angry and not like it, that’s not the real reason. He’s afraid that if he goes there and preaches to the Ninevites they might take the message seriously and be spared from the judgment. Because of the fact that Assyria is the enemy of Israel and of Jonah, he doesn’t want that to happen.

It tells us in Jeremiah chapter 51 verses 59 and 60 that when Jeremiah composes these oracles against Babylon that he sends a man named Seraiah who appears to be the brother of his scribe Baruch and he commissions Seraiah. When Seraiah goes to Babylon and accompanies Zedekiah in 593 BC, he commissions him to read the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecy’s against Babylon then to tie a rock
around them and throw them into the Euphrates, but as he’s reading them, if he actually preached them to the people, that’s not clear. The purpose of these oracles against the nation primarily was to speak to Israel and to teach the people of God the important prospective they need to keep in mind with all the things that were going on with Judah and Israel’s interactions with the other nations during the time of the classical prophet.

Why the Judgment on Foreign Nations

Here are some of the major themes and major reasons why God had his prophets convey these messages against foreign nations. Number one, it was a reminder to Israel and a demonstration to the people of Israel of God’s sovereignty over these other nations. The Lord is not just a nationalistic deity, who has influence in his own home territory. That’s often the way some of the gods of these other ancient Near Eastern people associate with; where their view is that they had a specific territory or area. God is not like that; he is not a nationalistic deity; he is not just interested in the people of Israel. He has a special relationship with the people of Israel, they are his heritage but he is actually the king over all the world and all of these nations answer to God.

We see several passages within these oracles against the nations that reflect that. The Lord is going to say to Egypt in chapter 46 verse 19 “Prepare yourselves baggage for exile, O inhabitants of Egypt! For Memphis shall become a waste, a ruin, without inhabitants.” The reason that God can deliver this kind of message against them is that in the verse right before this it says. “As I live, declares the King, whose name is the Lord of hosts.” Why can God announce that Egypt is going into exile, the same way that he can announce that Judah is going into exile? Because God is the king who controls what happens there as much as he controls among his people. The Lord is the Lord of hosts, the Lord of armies, who executes his will and carries out his sovereignty; it doesn’t matter whether it is in Judah or in Egypt. Remember one of the reasons why the refugees flee to Egypt and take Jeremiah with them is because they think this will move them outside the realm of
Babylon or outside the possibility of God bringing judgment against them. Jeremiah says that going to Egypt does not remove you from God’s territory, he his sovereign everywhere.

Elam

Probably the most distant land that is mentioned in these oracles Jeremiah 46-51 are the Elamites. Elam is a kingdom that actually to the east of Babylon. We don’t really see them focused on or highlighted in these other oracles against the nations, but the Lord says this about Elam hundreds of miles to the east of Mesopotamia which is 500 miles from the land of Israel and Judah. The Lord says in Jeremiah chapter 49, versed 37 and 38, “I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them, and I will set my throne in Elam and destroy their king and officials, declares the Lord.” Where does God’s sovereignty extend to? Imagine the furthest reaches of the nations at this time; “I will set my throne in the most distant place.” God is the king.

The Lord also says to Egypt in chapter 46 verses 9 and 10. “Advance, O horses, and rage, O chariots! Let your warriors go out: the men of Cush and Put who handle the shield, the men of Lud, skilled in handling the bow. That day is the day Lord God of hosts.” In the same way God could fight a holy war against his own people, in the same way that he could commission armies to fight against Judah. The Lord is the king who rules over these other nations as well.

I said this when we began our study on the book of Jeremiah, and I believe that one of the most practical things we can learn from reading from the prophets and one of the most encouraging things to be reminded of is the fact that the Lord is in control of every political situation. The Lord moves the hearts of kings he directs them like water to do his will. No matter how chaotic things seem to be in the world, no matter how chaotic things were in Jeremiah’s day, God is absolutely sovereign not just over Israel but over the nations as well.

Purposes of the Oracles against the Nations and Israel’s Situation

A second thing that these oracles against the nation do, is that they are a
word of encouragement to the people of Israel that ultimately God would deal with their enemies. God would ultimately also deliver Israel from their bondage, their exile, their military defeat, and from these nations that had oppressed Israel. Ultimately the situation is going to be reversed and God is going to bring judgment on these nations as well. As an Israelite, I’m hearing these oracles against the Philistines, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians and the Moabites. I’m not just hearing about God’s Judgment of the other guys but I’m also being reminded of how God will intervene to deliver his own people. Jeremiah chapter 46 verses 27-28 again in this oracle directed toward Egypt, “the Lord says, do not fear, O Jacob my servant.” So we have a salvation oracle being given to the people of Israel. “Do not be dismayed, O Israel, for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return, and have quiet and ease and none shall make him afraid.” Then it says, “Fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord, for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations.”

So why is God bringing judgment against these nations? Not just because he hates foreigner’s. Ultimately this is to bring about the deliverance of his own people. In Zechariah chapter 2, verse 8, the prophet says “whoever touches Israel, touches the apple of God’s eye.” So Babylon and many of these other nations that had oppressed the people of Israel or the people of Judah, in a sense by doing that has stuck their finger in God’s eye. When you do that God is going to respond, he is going to react. The Lord is ultimately going to save and rescue his people and deliver his people. So, there’s message of salvation for the people of Israel that emerges from these oracles in 46-51.

Foreign Alliances will not save Israel

A third thing and again it was a specific message for the people of Israel these oracles against these nations ultimately are to warn Israel or to warn the political leaders of Israel and Judah that alliances with these other nations are not going to save them from whatever crisis they happen to be going through.
Remember that Zedekiah in the final days of Judah as a nation was hoping that an alliance with Egypt would somehow either buy him time or provide deliverance from the Babylonian crisis. Jeremiah argued and reminded him look that’s not going to help you, that is not going to save you. Even if you could defeat the Babylonian army yourself, and all that was left was wounded men, they would come back and defeat you.

The prophet Isaiah during the Assyrian crisis had warned Hezekiah “woe to those who trust in Egypt and go down to Egypt” because that’s what Hezekiah’s advisors were encouraging him to do. Let’s make alliances, let’s make a coalition and maybe if we can come up with the right arrangement or the right political coalition, so we can avoid this. Their problems were not political, their problems were not military, their problems were spiritual. They had a problem with God. So these alliances are not going to save them. We have an interesting reflection of this idea.

Edom

In Jeremiah chapter 49 in the message that’s given to Edom, Edom is one of the neighboring countries beside Judah. They are descendants of Esau. They have a very close relationship with these people. But in chapter 49 verses 14 and 16: “I have heard a message from the Lord, and an envoy has been sent among the nations.” What is significant about that? If you go back to Jeremiah chapter 27 verse 3, we read about a conference that took place in Jerusalem in 594/593 BC that evolved envoys from several nations coming to meet with Zedekiah. Edom that is mentioned here was one of the people that had sent and envoy to Jerusalem. The reason that they sent envoys there is that they are meeting with Hezekiah to plan out their military strategy. How do we withstand, how do we resist the Babylonians?

God’s response to that is that he sent out his own envoys to the nations, and here’s what they say: “Gather yourselves together and come against her, and rise up for battle. For behold, I will make you small among the nations, despised
among mankind. The horror you inspire has deceived you, and the pride of your heart, you who live in the clefs of the rock, who hold the height of the hill.” They were sending envoys to Jerusalem planning how to resist the Babylonians. Zedekiah thought, “the Edomites, maybe they can help me out.” Well, God has sent an envoy that says the Edomites are going to be defeated. It does not make sense to make an alliance with people who stand under God’s judgment themselves.

The reason why the opening chapter in chapter 46 deals with a message that is directed against Egypt is that Egypt was the primary nation that Zedekiah was looking forward to help him with the Babylonian army. They can’t help him because they stand under God’s judgment as well, and the Lord is sending Nebuchadnezzar to fight holy war against Judah. The message in chapter 46 is that God is also going to send messengers or the Babylonians to execute holy war on Egypt as well. The purpose here is to warn the leaders of Judah, to warn the kings, that military alliances with these other nations are not going to work.

Purposes of the Oracles against the Nations:

Noahic Covenant Indictment

The final major purpose of the oracles against the nations specifically, is to indict these nations for their violations of God’s covenant. Israel stands under condemnation, they stand under indictment from God because they have violated the Mosaic covenant. They have broken the terms of the arrangement that God has made with Israel and Judah as his chosen people. But as God indicts the nations of the earth, remember, they are not under the Mosaic covenant, God is not going to pull out the ten commandments or the 613 commandments of the law and point those out to the people of the nations as a basis for why is God is judging them.

God is judging the nations, it seems like, because of their violations of the Noahic covenant that go earlier back into the time of salvation history. The Noahic covenant was not just an arrangement that God made with the people of Israel, the Noahic covenant was a covenant God had established with all nations. The scary
thing and one of the things that we’ll reflect on is that if the Bible describes this as an everlasting covenant, and if God judged the nations of the earth that were in the world during the time of Jeremiah and Isaiah, if God held those nations accountable for their violations of the Noahic covenant, and if this is indeed an eternal covenant than the nations today are just liable to the terms that God set out in that arrangement as well.

You remember that the primary responsibility that is placed on humanity in the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9:5-6, is that there is a restraint placed on bloodshed and violence. The Noahic covenant says that God is putting a new system into place that “whoever sheds man’s blood by man shall his blood be shed.” God is holding the nations on the earth accountable for their violence and their blood shed. So when God pictures the judgment of the earth, when the prophet Isaiah speaks of that in chapter 24:1-5, he says the whole world is swaying and reeling under God’s judgment. Why is God bringing this judgment? Because they have violated the everlasting covenant, and again that doesn’t seem to be the Mosaic Law because that’s a specific law, a specific covenant that God has made with Israel. The everlasting covenant most likely goes back to the arrangement that was established in the days of Noah. In Isaiah 26:19 in that same context, Isaiah says that in the future as God prepares to bring that judgment the earth will disclose its bloodshed. So what specifically is God going to judge the nations for? Their violations of the Noahic covenant.

In Jeremiah 46-51, often the specific reasons why God is judging these particular nations is not always laid out, but the underlying theology of the oracles against the nations I believe is that God is holding these nations accountable for their responsibilities that were established under the Noahic covenant.

In Amos 1-2, which the Lord is roaring in judgment and he goes out like a lion from the city of Zion, the first six judgment oracles there before God turns to Judah in Israel are against the nations that surround Israel and Judah. In that passage the prophet Amos is going to lay out the specific reasons for the judgment
that God is going to bring against these nations. Sometimes it’s because of the violence and atrocities they have committed against Israel and our whole principle of: if you stick your finger in God’s eye, God’s going to react to that. God reacts to the mistreatment and abuse of his people. One of the other things we see in those judgment oracles against the nations, is that they are often held accountable for the atrocities and the violence that they committed against nations other than Israel. So Amos says in chapter 2:1-2 that God is going to judge the king of Moab for his crime of burning the bones of the king of Edom. The judgment, the anger of the Lord, the sentence of God against that king has nothing to do with Israel, it has something to do with the violence that’s been perpetrated against another people, and you see the underlying accountability to the Noahic covenant there.

Habakkuk 2:12 speaks of the judgment that God is going to bring against Babylon and it says, “Woe to Babylon,” and “woe” is a death sentence, death is coming. Babylon is as good as dead. Why? Because it is a city that is built on bloodshed.

The prophet Nahum 3:1, there is going to be this terrible judgment of the city of Nineveh because of its bloodshed. From what we know about the Assyrians in history, they were an incredibly brutal, violent people even by the standards of the ancient Near East. So the Lord is going to hold them accountable for that. The next 2 verses in Nahum 3 picture the army that is going to come into Nineveh and is going to do the same thing to them that they have done to other people: there is prophetic justice here.

So the underlying theology of the oracles against the nations is that these nations are just as responsible, just as accountable to God as Israel is, but for different covenantal reasons. So that’s kind of the underlying theology of all of this.

List of Nations

Let’s note before we get into further explanation of what these oracles are about, let’s note the nations that are specifically referenced in these judgment
oracles that are found in the book of Jeremiah. Chapter 46, the judgment there is going to be against the nation of Egypt, and the Lord is going to bring them down. Chapter 47, the Philistines, and they were neighbors of Israel and Judah and they had been enemies since the time of the Judges. Chapter 48, the Moabites, chapter 49:1-6 the Ammonites, chapter 49:7-22 the Edomites, chapter 49:23-27 Damascus the capital city of the Arameans and someone that Israel had been engaged either in conflict or partnership with throughout their history. In chapter 49:28-33 the Arab tribes of Kedar and Hazor, not the Hazor in Israel, but the one that appears to be in Arabia. The Elamites chapter 49:34-39 are again a kingdom that was hundreds of miles to the east of Mesopotamia, or to Babylon. Then in chapters 50 and 51, the final oracle is against Babylon.

What we notice about this list is that it begins and ends with a superpower and someone that had been an empire. Egypt, in chapter 46, is not the empire that it once had been but Israel’s great oppressor in the past, and still a significant player in what’s going on in the political scene in Jeremiah’s day, at the end Babylon, chapters 50 and 51. So it’s racketed between these references to these two superpowers. In between you have these judgment speeches against all of the nations that are immediately surrounding Israel. It reminds us that no nation is too great to avoid the judgment, but no nation is too small that God is going to ignore them either.

When will Judgments Occur

So that’s the list of the nations. When you turn over to Ezekiel and you look at the nations that are mentioned there – the nations that are listed: Ammon, Moab, Edom, Elam, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon and Egypt, so with just a couple of differences, the nations are essentially the same. What do we know and what have we come to understand about these judgments, as we look at what God is doing in judging these specific groups of people. Notice that they’re in a specific geographical location. They’re in the immediate area surrounding Israel. This is an important thing to understand about these passages. These are judgments as they are
announced on these different nations are judgments that take place primarily in history. These are not judgments that I think are describing for us the great tribulation or final days of the second coming of Christ. These are judgments that are being carried out in the historical circumstances in situations of Jeremiah’s day.

In fact, most of these judgments are going to be carried out by the Babylonian army. In the message of judgment against Egypt, look at what we have here, “The word of the Lord,” chapter 46:1, “that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations. About Egypt. Concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco, the king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish, and which Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year, of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah.” So when is this judgment going to take place? This judgment is connected to the battle where Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in 605 BC. That was the battle that established Babylon as the dominant power in the ancient Near East but in the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, Jeremiah had announced the outcome of that battle before it ever takes place. Look I know what’s going to happen here.

Chapter 46:13 says this: “The word that the Lord spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, to strike the king of Egypt.”

Chapter 46:26, prophet says there, “I will the deliver them [the Egyptians] into the hand of those who seek their life, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon and his officers.” So at the beginning, middle and end in the oracle against Egypt, who’s the one that carries this judgment out? Nebuchadnezzar. It does not say “In the days of the great tribulations, I will hand them into the hands of the anti-Christ.” This is a historical judgment that happened hundreds of years even before the time of the coming of Jesus.

We have a judgment speech against the tribe if Kedar, this Arab group in chapter 49:30, and notice what it says there in terms of judgment, when is it going
to happen, when is this judgment going to be carried out. It says in verse 30 “Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has made a plan against you and formed a purpose against you.” How is the judgment of Kedar going to happen? Is this, again, the battle of Armageddon or the second coming? No, it’s the judgments that were carried out in Jeremiah’s day that were part of the historical situation.

So one of the things that often happens in popular treatments of Old Testament prophesy, is that we often go to the Old Testament prophets trying to explore things about contemporary events or what’s going to happen in the last days before the second coming of Jesus. Often we’re looking for specific references, was this event promised, is this event in Scripture, is this showing us that the end is near? These passages are not describing the end times. They are describing things that actually occurred in history.

Now there are parallels and patterns here that will definitely be reflected again in the judgments that are being carried out in the end times, and we’re going to talk more about that. It really is a faulty hermeneutics to go to these passages and to try and find these specific references either to contemporary political events, or to things that are going to happen in the future and we recurrently see popular treatments of prophesy doing this. And often, it’s a good way to sell a book or to make some videos that are going to be popular, or to gain an audience, but it’s really not valid hermeneutics. You have to look at the historical context and setting of the passage. There’s a very popular book called *The Harbinger* that tries to show that the judgment of America is prophesied in Isaiah 9 and 10. But when I look at the context of Isaiah 9 and 10, it’s talking about Israel and Judah in Isaiah’s day 800 years before the time of Jesus; it’s not talking about 20th century or 21st century America. So these are not judgments that will fall in the last days. These are judgments that are falling and being carried out in Jeremiah’s day, in the historical setting of that time.

**Day of the Lord: Near and Far**

Now the judgment of Egypt is described in Jeremiah 46:10: “That day is
the day of the Lord, God of hosts, a day of vengeance, where God will avenge himself on his foes.” And again, when we hear “day of the Lord” we again are drawn to the end times, the battle of Armageddon, and that kind of context. Remember the way that “day of the Lord” is used in the prophets it can refer to something that is either near or far. All of the individual judgments that God brought against Israel and Judah, and against these foreign nations that are the “day of the Lord.” The “day of the Lord” is when God comes down to defeat his enemies. The Babylonian invasion – that is the “day of the Lord” for the people of Judah. When Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptian army at Carchemish, Jeremiah says that was the “day of the Lord” for Egypt.

Now sometimes in the prophets, it’s really difficult to tell when are they talking about the “day of the Lord” that’s near and the “day of the Lord” that is far. But simply saying “day of the Lord” here does not simply mean this is an eschatological passage. Again, we’re talking about judgments that take place in history.

Zephaniah had said “the day of the Lord is near,” he’s talking about the invasion of Babylon. So, I think it’s an important hermeneutical principle to establish here and I hope that that doesn’t disappoint us here thinking, “I was hoping we’d learn some secrets about biblical prophesy here.”

Why the Nations are Judged: Hubris

One of the other things that we learn in this section is that it’s important for us to reflect on why is God going to judge these particular nations. I think there are a couple of ideas that come out. Again, as I read these many times, Jeremiah is simply going to announce the thing that is coming and it does not give a clear explanation why. You almost have to have an understanding of the history that lies behind all this. But the one thing that I do see come up again and again is that God is going to primarily judge these nations for their hubris and their pride. God has designed this world to be one where he is recognized as King, where he is the one who is honored and glorified and given dominion and honor. What we have
running throughout Scripture though is that humanity is in rebellion against that
kingship. Humanity refuses to give God the honor that he deserves. Many times
they’ve established their own counter-kingdom, where they are trying the supplant
that and establish their own glory. Man’s pride leads him to the point where he
even designs and devises his own gods. That’s pride. That’s putting your trust in
human resources rather than in God. So yes, the Lord is going to judge even the
gods of these nations, but primarily, he’s going to judge them for their hubris and
pride that is the foundation and the basis for their idolatry.

So the Lord’s going to say to the Egyptians, and here’s the descriptions for
the pride of the Egyptians, “Who is like this? Rising like the Nile? Like rivers
whose waters surge? Egypt rises like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge. And
he has said I will rise and I will cover the earth and I will destroy the cities and
their inhabitants.” A really effective image here. Egypt views itself like the Nile
that flooded its banks every year. Egypt says, in my strength and in my might with
my armies I am going to flow throughout the earth, I am going to overwhelm
them. The Lord says you are going to find out the limitations of your armies and
the limitations of your strength because God is going to judge your pride.

Against the Moabites in Jeremiah 48:7, and as we think about the nations of
today, if God is judging these ancient nations on the basis of their hubris and their
pride, think of the accountability that gives to us today. But God says about Moab,
“For because you have trusted in your works and in your treasures, you shall also
be taken; and Chemosh your god shall also go into exile with his priest and his
officials.”

So is there any relevance at all to us today about a nation coming under
God’s judgment because of their pride over their wealth and their treasures? Just
to reflect, there’s nothing in the Old Testament prophets that’s relevant to us
today, right? No nation ever... No, this is why all of this really matters. In the same
way God judged the pride of Egypt, and its imperial power; in the same way God
even judged a smaller nation like Moab that we probably wouldn’t even pay
attention to, God doesn’t ignore their pride and their hubris that’s caused them to devise their own gods and to put their trust into their own resources.

The Lord says about Moab, in 48:26, “Make him drunk,” talking about the judgment that’s going to come on Moab, “because he has magnified himself against the Lord, so that Moab shall wallow in his vomit, and he too shall be held in derision.” So you’re going to exalt yourself against the Lord, you’re going to vaunt yourself up, you’re going to glorify yourself and your pride and your accomplishments? The Lord will humiliate you by causing you to wallow in your vomit as you experience this devastating judgment that he’s going to bring against you. So the recurring thing that’s going to be said about these enemies is that the Lord is going to judge them for their pride.

Judgment on the Nations for the Mistreatment of Israel

One of the other things that’s going to bring judgment on these nations is their mistreatment of the people of Israel. We were just looking at the Moabites; they are going to be judged for their mistreatment of Israel. And it says this in 48:27, “Was not Israel a derision to you? Was he found among thieves, that whenever you spoke of him you wagged your head?” You mocked Israel during the time that they were experiencing a national crisis. The Lord is going to bring the same thing against you. The tables are going to be turned in the very near future. The Ammonites, again, one of Israel’s neighbors to the east of them, across the Jordan: “Concerning the Ammonites. Thus says the Lord: “Has Israel no sons? Has he no heir?” Or what about Israel’s land? Here’s the point, why then has Milcom, which was the god of the Ammonites, why has he dispossessed Gad? Or did the people of Israel not have descendants to pass their land on to? Is that why you and your gods invaded the land of Israel and took away their territory that belonged to the tribe of Gad? And you had your people settle in its cities. They had stolen territory from the Northern Kingdom of Israel and this went back to the Assyrian crisis before the time of Jeremiah. Here’s what the Lord says, “Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I cause the
battle cry to be heard” and there’s going to be a devastation of the Ammonites.”

Edomites

One of the people that are judged in this section are the Edomites. They are the descendants of Esau. They had been rivals of Israel throughout their history. Jeremiah doesn’t really talk about the reasons for the judgment of Edom, but when you go and read the book of Obadiah, one of the things that the prophet Obadiah brings up is that the Edomites actually joined forces with the Babylonians as they were invading the land of Judah. Their troops were mercenaries that fought against Judah with the Babylonians as they were invading Israel, or Jerusalem. Edom to the south had used the Babylonian invasion as an opportunity to take territory away from Judah, which is why there is this angry message of judgment against them. “Whoever touches God’s people is actually touching the apple of God’s eye.” So God is going to bring judgment against them.

Pride

So in terms of lasting theological principle, or lasting message that comes out of this, is it’s a judgment against a group of people that lived a long time ago in lands, in nations, that if we pulled out a biblical atlas, some of us might have a difficult time finding them. But the lasting theological principle that emerges from this is that God is ultimately going to judge every form of human pride. At an individual level, the pride of an individual who says “I can live independently of God, I don’t need him.” It doesn’t matter if you’re an atheist or a theist, if you live pretending that you don’t need God, then practically you are an atheist. That kind of pride will bring you under God’s judgment. But nations that have been lifted up in pride because of their wealth or their accomplishments or their history or their heritage or their military accomplishments. God ultimately is going to bring all of that down. The final judgment that God will execute both on the nations and the individuals will be a judgment that puts an end to all forms of human pride.
Now remember, the day of the Lord that’s being described in Jeremiah 46-51 is the day of the Lord that God has in store for specific nations. Isaiah 2 is talking more of the day of the Lord where God is going to bring judgment against the entire earth. Here is what that judgment is going to be all about, Isaiah 2:11 says, “The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and is lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it will be brought low.” So at the end of this, it says, “Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for what account is he?”

So this message that we begin to look at this and say “These oracles, what do they have to do with us? They’re about nations that lived a long time ago, why should we care about this?” The same pride that brought God’s judgment against them, is, ultimately, the reason that God will judge all nations in the future. It is the reason why God is actively in the process of judging nations today in the same way that he did in the days of Jeremiah. God is going to put an end to all forms of human pride. So I have to look at this and say “Maybe there are things in these passages that are relevant,” even if these are judgments that were carried out against people a long time ago. Maybe these judgments are relevant to us because God hates human pride. God ultimately in his righteousness and in his justice brings down nations that are lifted up in pride and that shake their fist in God’s face. I think we see that kind of pride in our country. Going back to that quote from Billy Graham, “If God doesn’t judge America, he’ll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah,” and, in light of Jeremiah, to Edom and to Moab, and to the Philistines, and to the Egyptians, and to Babylon because we’re lifted up by the same kind of pride.

Common Mistakes when Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

Now, we already mentioned the fact that in popular treatments of prophecy, we often try to find references to contemporary events. A question that people recurrently ask me about the Prophets: “Is the United States mentioned in biblical
prophecy? Can you find any verses?” “Is there anything about the war in Iraq or Afghanistan?” “Was 9/11 predicted by the biblical prophets?” “Do you know who the Antichrist is?” “Can you give us a date for the Second Coming?” And when I answer “No, I don’t know any of those questions,” they wonder, “And you teach the Prophets? You need to go back to Prophecy U, and learn some things!”

I have looked long and searched hard throughout the Prophets. I don’t see any references to the United States in biblical prophecy. I have not found any references, even in the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation, to the United States.

There’s a simple hermeneutical rule that we need to remember: All of the Bible is for us, but not all the Bible is about us. So these messages they are for us. They are messages that teach and instruct us, but they’re not about us. They’re about these nations that lived a long time ago. But here’s what they teach us: the judgments that God brought then are merely a preview of the judgments that God will continue to execute throughout history, and that God will ultimately bring against all people at the end of history.

Prophecy and America

Another mistake that we often make with biblical prophecy as Americans is taking the promises or things about Israel, and applying them to our own country. We are a Christian nation, we have a lot of Christians and a lot of churches here-so, we’re God’s chosen people; we are a holy nation. As things continue to progress in our day, we realize how far we are from that. But I think we understand, we are not God’s chosen people. God is not working through any nation today in the way he was through ancient Israel in the old economy, not even the modern state of Israel. God’s people are not a national entity anymore. They are the church that’s made up of people from every tribe and nation. So, another mistake we often make is taking prophecies that are given to Israel, and applying them to the United States.

God gives a promise to Israel in 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, which
are called by my name, will humble themselves and call upon me, confess their sin and turn to me, I will heal their land.” The primary application for that passage today is not the United States, it’s to God’s people, the church. If they will humble themselves God will bless them. But there’s not a guarantee for us as Christians in America that God is specifically going to heal our land.

Where do we find the United States in biblical prophecy? It’s not in specific passages; it’s not in specific promises or messages that are given to Israel. I think if we want to find the United States, in a general way, the place that we go are the oracles against the nations. Particularly these powerful and these great empires like Egypt, Babylon and Assyria, and in the ways that our nation has defied God or demonstrated its pride and rebellion against God in the same way that God judged those nations and for the same reasons that God judged them; God will judge us as well.

A writer named Julie Woods had an interesting article about the Minor Prophets several years ago, Assyria as the West, and thinking about the judgment speeches of Nahum and how they apply to us in the Western World to an imperial nation like America. It doesn’t mean that we simply make an equation between Assyria and America, and we’re bad, and we need to get rid of our armies, that’s not the point. But as we look at the reasons why God has brought judgment against those nations in the past, we are reminded that God will do the same thing to our nation at some point in the future. It’s inevitable. If there is not a Great Awakening that takes place in the future, that judgment may be right around the corner; we are living in that kind of society. But the same reasons God judged those people then, are why God has judged nations throughout history, and why God would ultimately judge us. So I don’t go to the book of Nahum and say America equals Assyria, but I go there and see in many of the reasons God judged those proud and defiant empires in the past, God is going to judge us in the future. If we take an honest assessment of the United States of America, you know, we may not say, “The United States equals Syria” or, “The United States equals
Babylon.” But, like Peter Lindert says in his book, we are probably somewhere between Babel and Beast. We’re somewhere between that city that defied themselves as God in Genesis chapter 11, and the Beast at the end of the book of Revelation who declares war on the people of God. We’re somewhere in between there, and because of that, God’s judgment will ultimately fall on us.

The nations that were judged then become a paradigm of God’s judgment in the future. One of these nations that recurrently comes up is the nation of Edom, the descendants of Esau. When I read prophetic text in the book of Isaiah that are talking about the Kingdom of God, or the last days, the judgment of God’s enemies often focuses on that tiny little nation. Isaiah 34, God is going to judge Edom, and then the Kingdom comes. God is going to judge Edom, Ezekiel chapter 35, and then the restoration of Israel comes. Isaiah chapter 63, the Lord is a warrior marching back from battle, coming back from Bozrah which is in the land of Edom. Now, that doesn’t mean God’s got a bull’s-eye painted on the people living where the ancient Edomites do. But what it does mean is that Edom, as the enemy of God and of God’s people, is a paradigm of the nations that will be judged in the future. The Old Testament prophets remind us of the reality of divine judgment, both for us as individuals, but ultimately for nations as well.

Back during the days of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln talking about why he believed that the war happened said in part that he believed that divine justice and divine retribution were part of that. He said: “Every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid for, or paid with-another that is drawn by the sword.” A historian by the name of Steven Keillor, in his book God’s Judgment, does an excellent job talking about this. He said we’ve come to a place as a society where we no longer believe, either because of our secularism, or our technology, so that God is pushed to the margins. Our different political ideologies, we’ve lost this ideal that God can judge and that God does judge nations. The Old Testament prophets and their oracles take us back to the fact that if God judged the nations then for their violations of the Noahic Covenant, then God will judge us. When we
steal other people’s land, we will experience judgment for that. When we murder unborn children by the millions every decade, God holds us accountable. This idea of the Noahic Covenant seems to be: The blood meter is running. But God, both with individual nations, and the world as a whole, eventually has had enough, and judgment falls.

So to close us out: Yes, we’re looking at a section that deals with judgments that happened in history, but they are reminder to us, both as individuals and people of various nations, that God’s judgment will ultimately come on us as well. God’s judgment is a reality, and even if we ignore it or pretend it doesn’t exist, it’s real, and it’s something that the prophets remind us we definitely have to take account of and face up to. Amos said, “Prepare to meet your God.” Both at an individual and national level, that’s something that we need to be more aware of in the culture that we live in.
Introduction

This is our final lesson and session in the book of Jeremiah and I want to thank those of you that maybe have watched or participated in part of this. My prayer and my desire is that God maybe in some way through this has increased your love for the book of Jeremiah, but more importantly, that he has given you a deeper love and understanding of the God of the Prophets. That’s ultimately what this project and this goal is about. Our goal is not just to fill people with biblical information, but to help them know God in a deeper and fuller way.

I believe that the prophets help us to do that in a way that’s true of no other part of the canon. Every part of God’s word has a unique contribution to make to us and when we leave some part of God’s Word out we’re going to miss something about what God is revealing to us through that. So, many of us, as Christians, have missed a great deal by not listening to the Prophets. So it has been an honor to be a part of this for those of you that have went through all of it, you deserve some type of medal. But for those of you maybe that have just bits and pieces, I hope that it’s been helpful.

I want to follow up on our last lesson with a second lesson on “The Oracles Against the Nations,” and focus specifically on the judgment of Babylon in chapters 50 and 51. Before we get into those specific chapters, let me remind you of something that we talked about last time.

Prophecy and Us: Application

I think one of the problems with prophecy, and especially when we begin thinking about eschatology and prophecy about the end times, is that we often want to go to the prophets and find very detailed and specific information about end time events or about things that are going on in our political situation today.
We may seek almost kind of coded information that’s giving us insider truth on what’s going on. Sometimes it’s things simply to satisfy our curiosity, or sometimes a concern for things that are going on in the world that’s very general but that may be a misunderstanding of what the Bible is designed to convey to us. I do not believe that the prophets are designed to give us detailed and specific information about end time events. More of what the prophets do are reflect to us some general patterns and things that we can be certain of that God is doing in the future, that God has done in the past, and many times there are recurring patterns. What God has done in the past? How God has dealt with peoples and nations, and these nations in Jeremiah 46-51? How are they being judged? Why God judged them is paradigmatic for how God judges nations today; and also representative of the type of judgment that God is going to bring in the future. Similarly, the experiences that Israel had as the people of God are very much related to our experiences as Christians and believers today. Prophecy is there more to give us general patterns than it is to always give us specific information.

I remember back during the days of the Cold War, and even as a young person, hearing my first sermons and messages on biblical prophecy it was often titles like “The Coming War With Russia,” and how this war between Israel and Russia was prophesied in passages like the Gog of Magog passage in Ezekiel 38 and 39.

In 1999, as the pastor, I had the opportunity to teach the prophets in Moscow in a Bible Institute they had there. We got to the book of Ezekiel and then we got to Ezekiel 38. Before we had even gotten into the passage, one of the students who used to be a news commentator during the Soviet era said, “You know I’ve always wanted to ask an American pastor this question: ‘Why do you people always preach that we are Gog of Magog?’” So talking to them about that issue is an interesting reflection and an interesting perspective on the prophets. They were not all that happy about the association of Russia with Gog of Magog. Of course the real issue is: what does the text really say, not whether we like it or
But as I’ve studied those kinds of passages, as I’ve studied the prophets, as I’ve studied these oracles about things that are going to happen in the end times, they often are more there to give us general pictures or anchors that we can hold on to. So I don’t think Ezekiel 38-39 prophesies for us something as specific as a coming war with Russia.

But what the prophets do tell us is that there does appear to be in God’s plans an eschatological battle. There is going to be an assault on the nations that resembles what happened with Babylon and Judah in the days of Jeremiah. The nations are going to come again. God is going to use that eschatological battle to bring judgment both against the nations, and against the people of God. You can read about that battle in places like Ezekiel 38, Micah chapter 5, Joel chapter 3, Zephaniah chapter 3, Zechariah chapter 12, Zechariah 14, Revelation 16 and 19, as it talks about the Battle of Armageddon. But it is more to give us a general picture that God is going to execute judgment on the nations and on Israel. What prophecy is not designed to do is to give us a program with the numbers and the names of all of the players that are going to be there.

When I go to a baseball game I always appreciate teams that have the names of their players on the backs of their uniforms; it’s easier to recognize. But in prophecy the players generally do not have their names on the uniform. Even in a passage like the Gog of Magog passage in Ezekiel 38, there are specific nations that are mentioned as allies of this king who is named “Gog of Magog.” But I believe the nations there are simply representative of a worldwide coalition that, again, is going to attack God’s people in the last days and God will bring judgment on them. There are seven nations mentioned in that passage; they come from four directions on the compass. So instead of trying to specify for us, it is going to be these people and this group and the nations that live in this particular geographical area. If you don’t live in those geographical areas it doesn’t have much to say to us. But if the passage is picturing for us worldwide rebellion against God, and where human pride and the counter kingdom that man has set up in opposition to
God, where that is ultimately leading us, then it ultimately has something to say to every one of us.

The greatest thing that prophecy does and what it has to say about the judgment of nations, the salvation of God’s people is that it gives us an assurance that ultimately, as God’s People, God wins. We’re on the winning team. We are part of God’s Kingdom. Ultimately these empires are going to come and go. These nations are going to come and go. The counter kingdom that man has set up in opposition to God’s true kingdom is going to defy God, and is going to oppose and persecute God’s people until the very end. That battle is always there; the same thing that is going on in Jeremiah’s day. God ultimately wins.

Again I will apologize for one more sports illustration, and this will be the last one. Since we are on the last video I can make that a promise. But when I watch a video or a recording of a game where my favorite team is playing, if I know the outcome of that game, I don’t really get bothered if there is a fumble in the second quarter or if they are behind at half time because I know the eventual outcome. I believe that prophecy is designed give us an assurance of the eventual outcome and to say, “No matter what God’s people face, God is ultimately going to deliver them. God is ultimately going to judge and to destroy the wicked.”

Judgment of Babylon

As we come to Jeremiah chapters 50 and 51, we are focusing on the judgment of Babylon as the final part of the book of Jeremiah. As we talked about in the judgment of these other oracles against the nations, I believe that we are primarily talking about a judgment that occurred in history. We are talking about the judgment of the Neo-Babylonian Empire that was established by Nabopolassar and that Nebuchadnezzar was king over and that carried away the people of Judah in the exile. It is the judgment on that specific group of people.

This is not a coded eschatological message about something that is going to happen in the end times. But just like we talked about in the previous video, even though this is a judgment on a specific nation that lived a long time ago, there are
applications and implications of this passage that have huge significance for us as Christians today. It has applications and implications that help us to think about not just our relationship with God, but the world that we live in and where humanity is heading, and finally and ultimately where history itself is heading.

The judgment of Babylon in the book of Jeremiah is very important because this is going to be the thing that brings about the deliverance and the salvation of God’s people. Jeremiah’s message is that the Lord has had a plan; he has elevated Babylon, he has given Nebuchadnezzar hegemony and control over the nations and over Judah itself for a specific reason: to execute judgment on the people of Judah for their covenant unfaithfulness toward the Lord. The Lord directs nations and circumstances and political events and armies and all of those things. The Lord is sovereignly in control of that and the Lord used the Babylonians to judge the people of Judah, but the promise in 50 and 51, and this goes back to also what Jeremiah preaches in chapter 50, is that God is also going to judge Babylon and through that, he is going to bring about the salvation of his own people.

Israel’s Return

Here’s the promise that is given to Judah and to Israel at the beginning of this section on Babylon: the Lord says in chapter 50 verses 4 and 5, “In those days and in that time, declares the Lord, the people of Israel and the people of Judah shall come together, weeping as they come, and they shall seek the Lord their God.” So what we’re talking about here is the spiritual restoration of Israel, the renewal of that relationship to God; it is finally going to be at the place where it needs to be because the people repent and come to God and acknowledge their sin. This is the new covenant; this is the berit that we read about in Jeremiah 30 to 33.

It says, “They shall ask the way to Zion with faces turned toward it and saying, ‘Come let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten.’” In Jeremiah chapter 31, the Lord promises that he will make a new covenant with the people of Israel. Here it says the people initiate, and they
come to the Lord and make an everlasting covenant with him. That relationship is going to be restored, but what ultimately is going to have to happen for that relationship to be restored would have to happen in the days of Jeremiah for the people to come back to the land is that God would have to deal with the Babylonians and God would have to bring an end to this empire.

Chapter 51 verse 10 is going to say this “The Lord has brought about our vindication, come, let us declare in Zion the work of the Lord our God.” So, Babylon has been the enemy of Judah; they have attacked the people of God; the Lord will ultimately vindicate his people. Whatever attacks, whatever oppression, whatever persecution the people of God will go through, God ultimately will vindicate them and deliver them. These empires come and go, as Daniel portrays, but ultimately a great stone is going to crush them. That stone is God’s kingdom.

Judgment Reversal

So, there’s the promise in the judgment of Babylon of the ultimate deliverance of God’s people. To bring about or to highlight this idea of reversal: how that God is first going to use Babylon to judge Judah and then the Lord is going to judge Babylon in order to save Israel. This complete reversal we see in these judgment speeches against Babylon in chapters 50 and 51 is a direct reversal of things that we have read about Judah in the earlier parts of the book. The judgment that is described and portrayed as coming against Judah in the first part of the book is described using even some of the same passages and terminology to describe the judgment of Babylon.

So, let’s take a look at how this works. In the earlier parts of the book of Jeremiah as God is bringing judgment against the people of Judah, he warns them that a boiling pot is tilting out of the north and is about to scald them with this burning liquid. It is a powerful description of an enemy army. In Jeremiah chapter 50 verses 3 and 9, now an enemy from the north is going to invade and to destroy Babylon. Babylon was the enemy from the north who attacked Judah. There is also going to be an enemy from the north that attacks Babylon. Jeremiah chapter
21 verses 1-5 pictures God as a warrior going out to fight holy war against the people of Judah. So, when the Babylonians come and they lay the siege against Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar is technically not the leader of the army; the Lord is. The Lord uses the series of “I will” verses in 21:1-5 to say, “it’s not just the Babylonians, it’s the Lord that’s fighting against you.”

Numbers of times in the book of Jeremiah the idea is the Lord has given Jerusalem into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. In Jeremiah 50 and 51 what we have going on here is the Lord is leading a holy war against Babylon. The Lord says in: Jeremiah chapter 50 verses 25 and 27, “The Lord has opened his armory and has brought out the weapons of his wrath, for the Lord God of hosts, [Lord of armies] has a work to do in the land of the Chaldeans. Come against her from every quarter; open her granaries; pile her up like heaps of grain, and devote her to destruction, let nothing be left of her.” So, in the same way that God fought holy war against Judah, The Lord is about to fight holy war against Babylon.

In chapter 50 verses 41 to 43 there is a message that is delivered there against the daughter of Babylon. Ironic! She is even described as a young woman in the same way as Judah and Jerusalem, who were described as the daughter of Zion. So, what’s going to happen in the book of Jeremiah, in the early parts of the book, the daughter of Zion is going to be judged. In the second half of the book or in this last section here, it’s the daughter of Babylon who’s going to be destroyed. In Jeremiah chapter 50 verses 41 to 43, is a direct quotation of what we have in chapter 6 verses 22 to 24. Now the message is no longer about Judah; the message is about Babylon. Now, let me read the passage there: “Behold, a people comes from the north; a mighty nation and many kings are stirring from the farthest parts of the earth. They lay hold of the bow and the spear, they are cruel and have no mercy. The sound of them is like the roaring of the sea; they ride on horses, arrayed is a man for battle against you, O daughter of Babylon.”

Now I’ve had sermons that I’ve tried to use before. Apparently, Jeremiah does the same and you know that message I preached against Jerusalem? That was
a good one. I’m going to bring it out and preach it against Babylon. Beyond a pastor simply recycling his sermon or a prophet recycling his sermon here, I think we have a theological message; the exact same kind of judgment that was brought against Judah at the beginning is going to be brought against Babylon at the end. There is absolute justice in what God does here. Babylon was used by God to carry out his purposes but that wasn’t Babylon’s intention. They weren’t there to do the will of the Lord; they were there to carry out their own, greedy plans to establish an empire and prophetic justice is going to demand that they receive the same thing back from God that they inflicted on Israel.

In the earlier parts of the book, in chapters 4 to 6, there are these pictures of an invading army that is coming into Judah and sometimes not even identified exactly who this army is. There are calls to the people in Jeremiah 4 to 6: Sound the trumpet, note the alarms, go inside the fortified cities and hide yourself, there’s an enemy army coming and they’re ferocious, you better watch out for them. Well, in chapter 51 verse 27, here is the message that’s given to Babylon: “Set up a standard on the earth; blow the trumpet among the nations; prepare the nations for war against her.” Now it’s Babylon that is having to sound the trumpet, get behind their fortified walls because now the invasion is against them.

Earlier in the book the warriors of Jerusalem are compared to women who are bending over in child labor because of the pain that they are going to experience. The promise or the warning in chapters 50 to 51 is that the warriors of Babylon are going to become like women in their fear. So God is going to bring about the execution of absolute justice.

Now we hear that, we read this, we know that that has historically taken place, but I want you to imagine the impact that this message must have had on the people of Judah themselves, or the exiles maybe who are living in Babylon and are living in the midst of this. Babylon is the greatest city in the world at that time.

Babylon is an empire; and for Jeremiah to stand there and say, “God is about to deliver this poor group of exiles and bring them back and reform them
and reestablish them into a nation, and, on the other hand, God is about to destroy
the most powerful city and the world.” There’s an incredible surprise element.
How in the world is the Lord ever going to bring this about? But the Lord is going
to bring down a nation like Babylon even at the height of its power and we know
that the Neo-Babylonian Empire didn’t last for very long.

Babylon’s Walls

In several places in these oracles, Jeremiah is going to make mention of the
walls and the fortification that surround the city of Babylon and I wanted to note a
couple of these. Chapter 51 verse 53 says this: “Though Babylon should mount up
to heaven,” and I can’t help but think of the tower of Babel in the book of Genesis
“and though she should fortify her strong height, yet destroyers would come from
me against her, declares the Lord,” Chapter 51 verse 58, also making reference to
the walls of Babylon: “Thus says the Lord of armies. The broad wall of Babylon
shall be leveled to the ground, and her high gates shall be burned with fire. The
peoples labor for nothing, and the nations weary themselves only for fire.” The
fortifications and the defenses of Babylon are not going to protect them.

Now I was reading, in preparation for this lesson, a description of the
fortifications of the city of Babylon during the time of Nebuchadnezzar in the
Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary and they give this
description. It says that “at the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the inner wall of the city
of Babylon measured about 21 feet thick, and the outer wall measure about 12 feet
in thickness. Along with that Nebuchadnezzar, is as a warrior and a conqueror in
extra-biblical records. He’s portrayed as a builder and an innovator and a creator
in that way. Nebuchadnezzar also had a protective moat dug around the wall and
filled it with water. He advanced the security of the walls with a system of
artificial lakes and flooded areas, that again would make it very difficult for an
army to invade the city. The walls were fortified with a number of gates the Ishtar
gate that you often see pictures of is the most famous example of that. You can see
a model of that in the museum in Berlin. And there were 250 towers around that
Empires Passing Away

As an exile or maybe someone who would look from the outside the city of Babylon, How is God going to bring this about? How is God ever going to carry this off? It was an impressive city. You had Nebuchadnezzar’s hanging gardens inside the city, the temple of Etemenanki that was built to the Babylonian gods, the representations of the dragons, and the lions, and the bulls that represented the powerful gods of Babylon. How’s all this going to come down? God is going to make this happen. God is going to bring this about. What’s very interesting about all of this, when thinking about biblical prophecy? Within a few hundred years of the time of Jeremiah, the city of Babylon for all practical purposes had essentially ceased to exist.

In the second century AD Lucian makes this comment. He says “Nineveh has vanished without a trace and soon men will search in vain, even for Babylon.” So here’s this city, in that day and in that time, how is this ever going to happen? Within a few hundred years Babylon was forgotten. It’s a great warning to us. We think our nation is strong because of our military or our economic status or whatever yet within a few hundred years, we may no longer be standing.

There’s a description of the empires of the world, or the empires of the ancient near east at least, in Ezekiel chapter 32 and this is, to me, just one of the most chilling passages. It just makes you stop and think because it’s a passage that is announcing judgment on the Egyptians, and judgment on the Pharaoh. Again it is powerful nation, an empire; not the nation that it once was, but still a significant player. But at the end of this judgment against the Pharaoh and Egypt, the prophet says, “on that day the cedar went down to Sheol and caused mourning.” There’s this sadness over the fact that the king of Egypt is going down to Sheol. When the king of Egypt arrives in Sheol, it’s interesting to see what he discovers there.

Chapter 32, verse 22, “Assyria is there and all of her company.” Verse 24: “Elam is there, in all her multitude around her grave.” Verse 26: “Meshech-Tubal is there
and all of her multitude.” One of the people that’s mentioned in the Magog passage in Ezekiel 38. Verse 29: “Edom is there, her kings and all of her princes, who for all of their might are laid with those who were killed by the sword.” Verse 30: “the princes of the north are there, all of them, and the Sidonians.” Verse 31: “When pharaoh sees them, he will at least be comforted” that they’re with him.

Now I heard last week about someone that’s writing a Texas Bible to update the Bible for Texans and using their idioms. You know, if we were to write an updated version of the book of Ezekiel, we could write out all of the nations and all of empires that have fallen in history and say, “they’re there with the Egyptians.” Someday, someone will write, “The United States is there with all of its multitudes.” So these passages may be historical judgments that God executed in the past, but they are a reminder of what is coming for the nations and what God is still doing in the present. God still judges nations, sometimes within history and ultimately all of them at the end of history.

In 1899, when the German archeologists who were doing the excavations on Babylon began their work, the whole city had become covered over and was practically undetectable. In fact, there were people, even at that time, who read about Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible and questioned whether or not he was a historical figure. This powerful nation is going to fall and its city seems immovable and inviolable, but when the judgment of God comes their walls are not going to protect them.

I’ve emphasized this point maybe enough but I want to say it one more time. This is a judgment in chapter 50 and 51 that describes something that has taken place in history. Again I do not believe that this is a coded eschatological message. This is the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the fall of Babylon and that empire and what it represented to Persians and to Cyrus in 538 BC.

Babylon’s Fall: Persians or Eschatological?

Now some people have questioned whether that’s an accurate way to describe or to portray what’s going on there and there’s a reason why that’s an
issue. As Jeremiah is describing the fall of Babylon here, the fall of the city is described in terms of an absolute destruction. The city’s going to fall, no one’s going to be left there, it’s going be turned into a heap of ruins a haunt of jackals and all these kinds of things. So some people have argued that the judgment of Babylon in the past couldn’t possibly be the complete fulfillment of what is described here. When Cyrus and the Persians captured the city of Babylon, they took it without a shot. In fact, many of the people that were living in Babylon at that time viewed the Persians as deliverers. So how can this passage that’s talking about this catastrophic judgment where the city’s going to be turned into a heap of ruins, no one’s going to be left there? How was that fulfilled by what happened in history?

So as a result of this and because of this destruction language that’s used with reference to Babylon here, many people have argued that what this passage is talking about is a rebuilding of Babylon and a destruction of Babylon that takes place in the end times. In Revelation 17 and 18 it’s also going to talk about the fall of Babylon the Great in connection with anti-Christ. So, many have taken this not to be a historical passage, but to be an eschatological passage. There were several popular treatments of Jeremiah 50 and 51 and other Old Testament prophecies back during the Gulf War and the conflict with Iraq. The idea was that the conflict between the United States and Saddam Hussein and everything that was going on at that time was a fulfillment of these passages in Jeremiah and Isaiah that talk about the destruction of Babylon. This is the prelude or this is the beginning of the end times and the last days.

Something that added fuel to this is that Saddam Hussein during his regime also made a decision that he was going to attempt to rebuild the ancient ruins of Babylon. He put inscriptions there as he was doing this and rebuilding the cities “This was built by Saddam Hussein the son of Nebuchadnezzar to glorify Iraq.” However Saddam Hussein’s plans were interrupted. So that idea that this was the beginning of the end times, was very popular during the time when Saddam
Hussein and was empowered while the Iraq war was going on.

But I think there is a better explanation of the destruction language that is here. The destruction language here is portraying the fall of Babylon to the Persians in a way that we see throughout prophetic literature. These things about the city being left without inhabitants, its turning into a haunt of jackals and all those kinds of things. It’s curse language that is recurring throughout the ancient Near East. Often times when Kings would make covenant treaties with each other, they would pronounce these types of curses on each other: “If you don’t keep this covenant, may your city be turned into a haunt of ruins and may your body be consumed by the birds of the air.”

When God had made his covenant with Israel during the time of Moses, he had implemented the covenant curses that sound, in many ways, like these ancient Near Eastern curses. So, we have statements in Jeremiah 50 and 51 about the destruction of Babylon that read like this [chapter 50, verses 39 and 40] “Therefore, wild beasts shall dwell with hyenas in Babylon, and ostriches shall dwell in her. She shall never again have people, nor be inhabited for all generations.” Chapter 51 verse 37, listen to what it says there, “Babylon shall become a heap of ruins, the haunt of jackals, a horror and a hissing without inhabitant.”

Fall Description: Literal or Curse Language?

So, how can these types of descriptions be used to talk about what happened when Cyrus, basically without a shot, took the city of Babylon? The answer again is that the prophet is simply using the curse language of the ancient Near East that makes the fall of the Babylonian empire vivid. We do not necessarily expect to see, ostriches flying out of the hanging gardens of Babylon. This is simply covenant curse language. So the fulfillment of this prophecy was carried out by Cyrus and the Persians. The prophecy was essentially fulfilled even if it was not fulfilled in an absolutely literal way by the demise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. That is what this passage is about.
It is important to remember that when you look elsewhere in the book of
Jeremiah, the same type of curse language is used with reference to Jerusalem. We
don’t always interpret that in an absolutely literal manner either. It says in
Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 11, “no one will live in the city of Judah” Or “in the city
of Jerusalem” or “in the cities of Judah”, I think’s what it says there. Jer 25:9 says,
“Jerusalem will become an everlasting ruin.” That creates some problems in light
of The Book of Consolation; it says that they are going to rebuild and return and
restore their cities. So, it is curse language used to describe, in a vivid way, the
destruction of Judah. Here in 50 and 51 this is curse language to describe in a
vivid way the fall of ancient Babylon and the kingdom that was reigned over by
Nebuchadnezzar.

In the book of Daniel, it tells us that there was one day that
Nebuchadnezzar goes out and he looks at the city and he says, “Isn’t this Babylon,
the great city that I have built with my own strength and my own power?” God
ultimately humbles him about that, but God is also going to ultimately humble the
Neo-Babylonian Empire completely by giving it over into the hands of the
Persians. That is what Jeremiah 50 and 51 is about. We interpret Scripture in light
of its surrounding historical context and in light of the literary conventions and
language of that. I hope that helps us to understand that a little more effectively.

Application: Babylon as a Paradigm/Model

If that’s our approach to the book we might walk wistfully away from this
saying, “We got another history lesson.” And interesting that all of this happened
in Jeremiah’s day; it’s interesting what happened to Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-
Babylonian Empire, but so what! What does that mean to us? Well, as I begin to
look at the name and the title and the place of Babylon I realized that, as I’m
studying this in Scripture, Babylon in Scripture represents something more than
just the ancient city. So I think there is an applicational significance to this. Even
though this is not describing specific eschatological events, there is eschatological
significance to this because the geographical place of Babylon, in fact, represents
something more than just a city.

I believe that if you go all the way back to Genesis, what Babylon represents in Scripture is that Babylon is a paradigm nation that reflects humanity, kings, kingdoms and rulers that stand in opposition to God and to God’s people. The ultimate enemy of Israel in the Old Testament is Babylon, as they take the people into captivity and destroy the temple. Babylon in that sense represents human opposition to God’s purposes. That goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 11 where Babylon is the place that the people gather together in defiance of the Lord’s command. They attempt to build a tower that reaches and stretches into the heavens. What they are doing there is they are setting up a counter kingdom; they are setting up an alternative form of religion where they can manipulate God in the way that they want. They are living in defiance of God.

God had made Adam his vice-regent, and Adam as the image of God would live under God’s rule. Adam rebelled against that and wanted to go outside of God’s rule and God’s dominion. The people in Babylon who build this tower in Genesis chapter 11, they represent that same kind of defiance toward God’s kingdom and God’s authority. Babylon is home base throughout the Old Testament for human opposition to God.

This idea about Babylon and the king of Babylon is also reflected in a taunt song about the king of Babylon that is found in Isaiah chapter 14. Here is the king of Babylon, in his hubris, in his pride, in his defiance against God, and remember that in these oracle against the nations, that is the primary reason why God is going to bring judgment. But listen to what the king of Babylon says and you get the idea that the king of Babylon is pretty impressed with himself. And here is his statement as he finally falls, here is how the people react to this. “How you are fallen from heaven, O day star, the son of dawn.”

Now many people have seen the fall of Satan being described here. In context, it’s the death of the king of Babylon, and he is the one who is like Venus. He was at the top of the skies, the morning star in the early morning, but when the
sun comes up after the dawn, he falls from the sky. That is the demise of the king
of Babylon, but listen to his hubris: “You said in your heart, I will ascend into
heaven above the stars of God, I will set my authority and my throne on high, I
will sit on the mount of the assembly in the far reaches of the north,” and one of
the reasons that people have seen Satan here is that this seems like someone that’s
extra-human, but that’s what the king of Babylon thinks about himself. “I am
godlike in my power, and I will set my throne up in the heavens, where I want I
will defy God. I will defy his kingdom; I will ascend about the heights of the
clouds; I will make myself like the most high.” It is the same thing that Satan said
to Adam, ‘eat the fruit and you will be like God.”

Here's what actually happens to the king of Babylon: "That you are brought
to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and they
will ponder over you." So here's this guy who thinks that he's godlike, and he's
going to sit in the divine assembly and make himself like the Most High God.
What's going to happen to him? The problems with his pretensions to deity are that
he is a man and he's ultimately going to die and go down to Sheol. In an almost
humorous way, we have the descent of the king of Babylon to Sheol here in Isaiah
14. The other people and the rulers and the kings that are there. The king of
Babylon was put there with his armies. They are surprised, "have you seen who
showed up today?" It is almost like the police officer that shows up at the prison
block. He has become one of them, "come to your place of royal dignity; we have
a bed of maggots for you to lie down on for the rest of eternity." The passage starts
out with him saying, “I will set my throne on high.” The passage ends with him
going down to Sheol and lying down on his maggot bed. That's the pretension of
Babylon; that's the hubris of humanity in rebellion against God.

In Daniel chapter 2, Daniel pictures history as the working at the time of
the Gentiles involving four great empires: there are the Babylonians, the
Medes/the Persians, the Greeks, and then a fourth empire that either represents
Rome or some eschatological power or a combination of the two. At the end of
these four empires, the kingdom of God comes down like a mountain and will be there forever, and God's kingdom will be established permanently. These nations are there and they're here and then they're gone. They may appear to have great power but they will ultimately be destroyed. Babylon, in this passage, doesn't just represent one kingdom; it's a reminder to what happens to all of humanity, and every human empire, every human kingdom that stands in defiance of God. It's paradigmatic of what God is going to do to every kingdom, to every empire that stands in opposition to him.

Jeremiah chapter 51 verses 34 and 35, again reflect, what does Babylon represent here? Some very interesting imagery is used to describe Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom. The Lord says, Judah says, “Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has devoured me, has crushed me. He has made me like an empty vessel. He has swallowed me like a monster. He has filled his stomach with my delicacies. He has rinsed me out.” So in this passage, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire is described like the chaos monsters of the Old Testament. Like these monsters, like leviathan, and the sea monsters that God fights against, controls and subdues because they represent the forces of evil. I think what this ancient Near Eastern imagery is ultimately pointing to is the fact that these nations are inspired by the great dragon, Satan; the dragon that is described for us in Revelation chapter 12. Babylon is a depiction of that chaos monster that hates God; that opposes God, and God’s people. The Lord is ultimately going destroy all of these monsters.

In Daniel chapter 7, the final empire that rises out of the sea is not described as a man; it's described as a beast, as a hideous monster. That's really what human government becomes, and what this human counter-kingdom becomes. As it defies God, it seeks to establish its own power, the Lord will ultimately destroy that final power in the same way that he destroyed Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

I believe this representation of Babylon as the symbol and the paradigm of
evil carries over into the New Testament as well. As the early Christians and as the early church, as they’re engaged in a conflict with Rome, and Rome is persecuting the church. The early church comes to look at Rome as another embodiment of Babylon. I mean, they're not in the same geographical place, but they represent the same spiritual reality: nations, kingdoms, empires that defy God and persecute God's people.

So Babylon becomes paradigmatic of any nation that stands in opposition to God, and again as we assess where does America stand in all of this? There's not a specific reference to the United States anywhere in Scripture, but Peter Leithart again says, "we're somewhere between Babel and Beast." We're somewhere between those people that built that tower, defying God in Genesis chapter 11, and that beast that builds an empire at the end of time in Revelation as he goes out to wage war on the saints and on God's people. We're somewhere there. Rome in the first century was an embodiment of what Babylon was all about.

So 1 Peter 5:13, Peter as he is closing this book sends greetings and he says, "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings and so does Mark my son." There's no evidence that Peter ever went to Babylon. So the reference here to Babylon is Peter in Rome and he makes reference to Rome as the city of Babylon. Why? Because there is a typology that goes on throughout Scripture. The Tower of Babel, Babylon is the seat of opposition against God. For Isaiah and Jeremiah, the Bablonians, are God's instrument. They hate God's people, they oppose, they persecute them. Revelation and in the New Testament, Rome is simply another embodiment of what Babylon represented.

So in Revelation 17 to 18, the final aspect of this is that Babylon the Great becomes the center of the kingdom of Anti-Christ. I'm thankful that I don't have to address all the interpretive issues that are in the Book of Revelation, and I'm glad I can leave that for someone else, but I believe that there are actually both historical and eschatological references there. Rome is a representation of what John is
speaking of there.

In Revelation 17:9, the city of Babylon is described as being a city that is on seven hills. That seems to be a representation of Rome, not of Babylon. But again, what we have being portrayed there is not just Rome, it is the opposition to God and God's people that will continue to the very end of time and that will ultimately culminate in the rebellion of the man of sin who would lead the world astray again.

So is there any relevance or significance to the historical lesson that we have about the judgment of Babylon in Jeremiah 50 and 51? Absolutely; it’s a representative of a conflict that wages itself throughout the entirety of Scripture: the counter kingdom of man versus the kingdom of God. Babylon represents that counter kingdom; God ultimately wins. All of those empires that stand in rebellion against God, Ezekiel chapter 31, all of them will ultimately go down to Sheol. So there's an incredible promise here given to God's people, that we're on the winning side.

Revelation and Jeremiah: Babylon and Jerusalem

Now I believe that the book of Revelation and the book of Jeremiah, as they speak of these two counter kingdoms. Again these are not just giving us eschatological information, but it's asking us to think about our lives and where do we align ourselves? In a symbolic way, let's not just think about Babylon and New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation as giving us eschatological information. Let's think about what those cities symbolically represent and where do we align ourselves.

Desmond Alexander, in his book *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, writes this, he says, "The Babylon of Revelation is often taken to be a cipher for Rome: the greatest city or the great city in the first century AD. There's no doubt that Rome is included within the image of Babylon. However, Babylon as a symbol should not be restricted to the capital of the Roman Empire because it represents and embodies what human beings strive after when they are separated from God."
Babylon is the antithesis of the city that God himself desires to construct upon the earth."

He goes on to say later on the next page. “In Revelation, the city of Babylon symbolizes humanity's obsession with wealth and power, which becomes a substitute for knowing God. History witnesses to the ongoing existence of Babylon, as one nation after another has used its power to grow rich at the expense of others. We live in a world where economic power dominates national and international politics.”

James Resseguie, in his commentary on *Revelation, a Narrative Commentary*, says something very similar about Babylon and new Jerusalem in his commentary as well. Let me read just a couple of quotes there and we'll tie this all together. "The two cities, Babylon and new Jerusalem, are symbolic. The new Jerusalem is the ideal city, the city of God, the new promise land. The other symbol, Babylon, is the satanic parody of Jerusalem. Babylon looks like Rome with its seven mountains, claims divinity, blasphemous names are plastered on its throne, the scarlet beast. Yet Babylon is more than the imperial city. It is Babylon, the ancient city of Israel's exile and alienation. It is Sodom, and a symbol of wickedness."

He goes on to say: "Babylon and Jerusalem represent the two choices of the Apocalypse. Babylon, the city of this world, the place of exile and alienation for Christians, is the spiritual capital for those who are earthbound, whose point of view is from below, and from this world. The earthbound includes not only those outside the church, but also those within it. Babylon is where the inhabitants of the world dwell and the followers of the beast make their throne, and make their home. Yet Babylon is not only the home of the earth's inhabitants. It is also where, in this present evil age, Christians live, although it cannot be called their home. In John's world, Christians are exiled to Babylon. Thus, John calls Christians to come out of Babylon and not to take part in her sins."
Warning to America

So I believe there's an eschatological message in all of this. There's a warning to America. There's a warning to every nation in the world. What happens to nations like Babylon? They will ultimately be destroyed, but there's a practical application for all of us even as individuals now. Where do we align ourselves? Do we live in the sphere of this world and love this world and live with the values and thoughts and world system that reflects Babylon, or do we live with the values and the kingdom priorities that reflect the new Jerusalem? Just kind of a practical, personal application of all this, but God's message in Jeremiah 46-51 is that God was going to judge the nations of the earth. God was going to judge the nations of Jeremiah's day, and it's a message for the nations that come after them as well. It may not be Scripture directly to us, but it is Scripture that ultimately is applicable to us.

Promise, Hope, and Restoration

Now if that's all we had in Jeremiah 46-51, I think we'd hear an important message, but one that's pretty depressing. The nations are coming under God's judgment, but in the last couple of minutes that I have, this is my last shot to teach you anything out of the book of Jeremiah. There's also, incredibly, in the midst of these messages of judgment, there is also a promise that is given to certain of these nations. Now, there is no hope given to Babylon here, but in Jeremiah chapter 48 verse 47 it says this, and it is just interesting to note this passage. After God judges the Moabites, who had been rivals of Israel for a long time, the Lord says this: "'Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab and in the latter days, declares the Lord." Thus far is the judgment on Moab." God says after I've judged the Moabites I'm going to restore their fortunes; I'm going to do the same thing for those pagan people that I did for my people.

Chapter 49 verse 6: the Ammonites, and remember, they had encroached on Israel's territory and that's why they were being judged, but at the end of this passage on the Ammonites in chapter 49 verse 6 the Lord says: "But afterward, I
will shuv [return]. I will restore the fortune of the Ammonites. declares the Lord."
Chapter 49 verse 39 the Lord says this: "But in the latter days, I will restore the
fortunes of Elam. declares the Lord."

Now, we don't know the specific reasons. Why does God say that he's
going to restore the fortunes of some of these people and not of the others? Again,
I'm not sure. It's making a distinction between specific groups of people. I think
it's simply reflecting that even when God carries out his judgment on the nations
of the earth, his ultimate plan and his ultimate design is to bring people from those
nations into the kingdom of God. They will have their fortunes restored as they
come to know Israel's Messiah - as God does his great work for Israel in restoring
their fortunes. The Lord is going to do absolutely the same for the nations that
surround them; they are going to be included in God's kingdom.

There's one last passage that I want us to look at in Jeremiah that I think
reflects exactly the same idea. God has plans of salvation for the nations that are
just like the plans and the designs and the intentions that he has for the people of
Israel. Missions, in the Bible, does not begin with the Great Commission in
Matthew 28. Missionary endeavor does not begin with Acts 1:8 in God sending his
people out to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.
Missions begins with Genesis chapter 12. "Through you I will bless all nations on
earth." To the prophets, as they talk about the restoration of Israel, they are also
going to talk about the restoration of the nations.

One of the great missionary passages in all of the Old Testament that we
will use to close our study of the book of Jeremiah is found for us in Jeremiah
chapter 12 verses 14-17. Listen to this passage: "Thus says the Lord, concerning
all of my evil neighbors who touch the heritage that I have given my people, Israel
to inherit, 'Behold, I will pluck them up from their land, and I will pluck up the
house of Judah from among them..." What's God going to do to the house of
Judah? He's going to pluck them up, overturn, destroy; those are the verbs that
describe that work of judgment. God is going to do the same thing to the nations,
but here's the promise: "...After I have plucked them up, I will again have
compassion on them..." And that verse doesn't just talk about Judah, it's talking
about the nations. "And I will bring them again each to his inheritance, and each to
his land. And it shall come to pass that if they will diligently learn the ways of My
people, to swear by my name as the Lord lives even as they taught my people to
swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people."

Again, the same words that are used to describe the salvation of Israel, to
plant and to build, describe the nations as well. An amazing thing is God's
salvation even extends to the Canaanites, who taught the Israelites to swear by
Baal. The people that were supposed to have been destroyed when the Israelites
came into the promised land, even they get in on the blessings of salvation. This is
a reminder to us that God is ultimately going to build his kingdom from every
tribe, every nation, every people group, and for the people of Israel that kingdom
was going to include people and nations that they would have never envisioned
ever coming under the sphere of God's blessing.

Jeremiah, what a great book and what a powerful book. It's been an honor
to be able to teach it and to be involved in this video series, but Jeremiah is a
prophet of both judgment and salvation and that judgment is for Israel and for the
people of Judah, and that salvation is for the people of Israel and Judah as well.
But God's judgment and God’s salvation are for the nations, and that's why the
book of Jeremiah continues to speak to us and why it continues to have a powerful
message that's relevant and applicable to us today, just as it was in the context in
which it was first given. Thank you again for being with us and being a part of this
study.
Session 30: Oracles against the Nations (Babylon)  613