

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 5 – Jeremiah: Pictures

Introduction

Jeremiah was the last great prophet of the Southern Kingdom (Judah). He spoke for God during the final years of godly King Josiah's reign, but also during the following reigns of Josiah's descendants: Kings Jehoahaz (3mths), Jehoiakim (11yrs), Jehoiachin (3 mths), and Zedekiah (11yrs), who did not follow in their forefather Josiah's godly heritage. God's final judgment was predicted, yet a repentant heart among those in the nation was still an option for mercy, unbelievably (4:1-4), if heeded. However, the unheeded pleadings were now leading to an impending dark hour of the Babylonian captivity. The 'false' prophets among Jeremiah's contemporaries, were continuing to predict that Judah was going to have a light and short '2-year discipline' (Jer. 28:3,4; 38:1-4). Jeremiah's message proclaimed the opposite - that the Babylonians were certainly going to take them into captivity for 70 years (25:1-14). There would be a long horrific siege, the destruction of the magnificently built temple of King Solomon, and all their cities and farm lands destroyed.

God's earlier predictions through Moses (Deut.28), had been repeated through all the prophets up to Isaiah and finally Jeremiah, that if they chose not to obey the Mosaic covenant they would be expelled from God's precious and holy land.

Jeremiah was also to proclaim that it was God's will for them to willingly accept the yoke of the Babylonian captivity so that they could flourish and eventually return to their land. This message made Jeremiah immensely unpopular and led to the charge that he was an anti-nationalist traitor, being thrown into prison for proclaiming a treasonous message. He prophesied that they would choose to resist God's promise and ally themselves with the other nations. In the end, Jeremiah was shown to be 'God's true messenger', while all the other prophets who pointed the people in the opposite direction were shown to be liars. Throughout Jeremiah's prophecies, God spoke of the future of His people who

would be a blessing to the whole world, led by a righteous KING (Jesus the LORD), who would be a human descendant of King David (Jer 23:5,6). At that time, the hearts of the Israelites would be a true heart of faith and obedience, unlike the hearts of the people during Jeremiah's day. God Himself, ("*I will...*", ch.30,31), would bring about great healing and restoration. Jeremiah was 'the prophet of the broken heart'. God's emphasis on 'the heart' was mentioned some 66 times throughout Jeremiah's messages. God propelled Jeremiah to go and preach judgment not only to Judah but to all the nations surrounding Israel who also had not acknowledged Him as the Sovereign LORD, and had abused His chosen people (chs. 46-51).

Jeremiah was born in Anathoth, into a lineage of priests. His father was Hilkiyah, not to be confused with Hilkiyah the 'High Priest' under King Josiah. He was still a young man (teens or early 20's) when God called him to be a prophet. Following in the footsteps of his father as a priest would have been a far easier and predictable calling. Yet God called him to the ministry of a "prophet" and he initially challenged this lofty, divine and stressful calling, questioning if he was too young and inexperienced for such a responsibility.

Jeremiah had a difficult and lonely life. He was commanded by God not to marry or have children (16:1-4), because marriages and families were doomed to be destroyed. He was despised by the people of his hometown Anathoth, and they even tried to kill him; he often lamented his life and calling to ministry, even cursing the day of his birth; his messages from God were constantly opposed by all the false prophets; the kings to whom he spoke did not believe him; he was imprisoned for long periods of time; the first scroll containing his prophecies was cut up and thrown in the fire by King Jehoiakim; and he almost drowned when he was thrown into a cistern full of mud. Fortunately, a courageous man named Ebed-Melech, rescued him at the risk of his own life (38:4-13). Jeremiah was eventually taken to Egypt against his will by the remnant who survived the Babylonian invasion, still choosing to trust in another nation rather than God. He also wrote the book of Lamentations, and has earned the name, "The Weeping Prophet."

In the first part of our two-part survey of Jeremiah we will focus on several of the 'pictures' (parables) that God gave him to deliver his message to the nation. But before we look at the pictures, let's look at his call to ministry in the opening chapter of the book.

Jeremiah's call to Ministry: Ch.1

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:4-10).

There are several things to note here: 1) God had set Jeremiah apart for his life's work even before he was conceived. 2) His age did not matter because God was with him to support him. 3) His words were given to him by God, thus authoritative and true. 4) His message and ministry would impact the rise and fall of many nations, not just his own beloved Israel and Judah. At the end of ch.1 we see God calling his chosen servant to arise and courageously enter into his calling as God's mouthpiece:

"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD (1:17-19).

Jeremiah would later need this assuring word from God, because he would indeed be opposed by the kings, officials, priests, false prophets and the people of the land. Yet, **Jeremiah + God** would be a **majority**- strong enough to overcome any opposition.

God calls everyone to believe in Him as Creator and Savior (through Christ), with an amazing journey with Him planned for those who believe in Him. Jeremiah had a tender heart that could represent the heart of God. The downside was that his heart was easily discouraged, even doubting God's goodness; being tempted to not be firm when needed. How has God wired you? How is your unique life an opportunity to be a channel of God's love and truth in a world that desperately needs to hear about Him? Ask Him to show you His plans that He has for you (Jer. 29:11).

Pictures from Jeremiah

All the prophets used pictures, metaphors and living illustrations to declare their God-given messages. Jeremiah is particularly vivid in the way he depicted God's word. We will explore a few of his pictures, and then give a broader list at the end of this lesson.

1) Broken Cisterns – Ch.2

“Cross over to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror,” declares the LORD. “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (2:10-13).

In ancient Israel, the people dug large holes in the ground to capture and retain water. Villages had large cisterns for community use, while individuals dug smaller home cisterns. In dry seasons, the cisterns might crack causing them to lose water.

God's people were turning to false gods and to other nations for help overcoming their problems. They had “*exchanged God*” for idols that were “*not gods at all.*” In doing so, they were relying on “*broken cisterns that could hold no water.*” At the same time, they were failing to rely on God who is a “*spring of living water*” (a spring that perpetually bubbles up from the ground with a never-ending supply of clean, fresh water).

JESUS used similar language when speaking with the Samaritan woman he met at a well (John 4). She had been digging her own “*broken cisterns,*” trying to find fulfillment in relationships with men; yet, she remained unsatisfied. Jesus told her: “*Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*” (John 4:14).

Every one of us is prone to seek our fulfillment in finances, status, education, success, athletics, promotions, health, beauty or relationships. Yet, nothing on this earth can satisfy the deepest longings of our soul. God has made us in His image, to know and relate to Him, regardless of our status or lot in life. Therefore, filling the God-shaped hole with some earthly shaped ambition or person, will never satisfy us. Ask God to reveal the “broken cisterns” that you are digging.

2) Fallow Ground – Ch.4

This is what the LORD says to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem: “Break up your fallow ground and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or my wrath will flare up and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it” (4:3,4).

“Fallow” ground is land that has been left untilled for a season. While lying fallow, the ground hardens over. Although ‘fallow’ gives the impression that the field is just ‘neutral’, the truth is that weeds and thistles will grow up through the hard ground without any assistance. Thus, when the time comes to plant, the farmer must take two steps to prepare the land: 1) He must break up the hardened soil, and 2) remove any weeds that may have sprouted during the time the land remained untilled. If either of these steps is not taken, then the harvest from that ground will be ruined.

Like fallow ground, the hearts of God’s people had become hardened and unreceptive to His word. Weeds of lies concerning where their hope and strength was to be found continually caused them to be led astray. For some 700 years, God had implored His people to break up the fallow ground (soften their hearts) so that the “seed of His word” could penetrate and bear fruit. Now, one last time through Jeremiah, God pleaded with His people to stop being hard-hearted. Similarly, God implored them to NOT sow among thorns that could choke out God’s word – thorns such as devotion to other gods, unbelief, worldly cares, etc.

Jesus’ parable of the 4 soils (4 kinds of hearts) repeats themes from Jeremiah (Mark 4). Jesus spoke of hardened soil that cannot receive God’s word; of thorn-infested soil that chokes out the fruit of God’s word; of rocky soil that is too shallow to receive the word deeply; and good soil that receives the word and bears much fruit.

Whether through Jeremiah or Jesus, each of us is challenged to examine the receptivity and ‘soil quality’ of our own heart. Perhaps at an earlier time of life our heart was more tender and responsive to God’s word. Now we have allowed weeds and thistles to infest our view of Him and His heart for the world. We don’t long for Him and have receptive ears that hear and a heart that responds like before. God challenges each of us to break up and weed out the hardened soil of our heart and once again long for His love and life to be planted and bear fruit in our heart.

3) The Crossroads – Ch.6

This is what the LORD says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it’” (6:16).

We have all had the experience of coming to a fork in the road where we must decide which way to turn. Today, we have navigation devices that will tell us the best way to go. The goal of these navigation tools is to help us have the safest, quickest and most satisfying journey possible. In ancient times, when a traveler came to a fork in the road and did not know which way to turn, the “navigation device” was to ask someone there, with knowledge and experience, which way to go.

God implores His people, Israel, to stand at the crossroads of life and to ask for “the ancient paths,” the “good way,” and to walk in that path. The “ancient paths” would refer to the paths of faith and obedience walked by people like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Miriam, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Hannah, David, and many others. God assures His people that if they *ask* and then *heed the advice given*, they will “find rest for their souls” on the journey of life.

God had sent Israel many, many prophets (like Jeremiah) to point people down the right path, the path leading to rest. But the people of Israel would not heed the wise guidance given by the prophets: *But you said, “We will not walk in it.”*

In words very reminiscent of Jeremiah, JESUS stood at the crossroads of life and offered a path to people that would lead to “rest for their souls.”

“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

From whom do you seek advice? Do you have trusted people who follow God’s wisdom, who can pray with you and guide you in God’s ways? Many turn to social media, books, articles or talk show hosts, or news commentators... much wisdom can be gained from secular sources, yet ultimately the advice given needs to be guided by and weighed against God’s truth and the wisdom of those further along in life’s journey. Who are your mentors and how are you filling your mind with God’s truth to guide you in your quest for direction at the crossroads of life?

4) Bush in the desert, or tree by the stream – Ch.17

This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the desert; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit” (17:5-8).

Ultimately, our life is to be shaped by our level of *trust (faith, confidence)* that we have in God. Israel had a consistent pattern of failing to trust God’s character – His goodness, love and plan for their lives – and turning instead to other gods or sources of hope (alliances with other nations). God says to Israel that trusting in anyone or anything but Him leads to a life that is like a bush in the desert – dry, wearying, fruitless and dying. Israel had been experiencing the *bush in the desert life* for many centuries due to their failure to trust God and walk in obedience to His words. Yet whenever they would place their complete confidence in God, His character and His words, they would experience the blessed life that God had promised- a strong, stable, enduring and fruitful life

The same principle is true for us today. The richness of our life is found in the roots of our faith and obedience growing ever deeper into the constant flowing stream of God’s life. Like the branches that are connected solidly into the thick grape vine (John ch. 15), the sap can flow continuously into our ‘veins’ if our roots are growing deep into the life-giving streams of God’s life. No matter what season of life we are walking through, we can still bear fruit of His hope and peace and supernatural joy. It is a much deeper and abiding fruit that carries us beyond our circumstances.

and blessed nation.

Note: This parable from Jeremiah bears a striking resemblance to Psalm 1, where the “blessed man” is depicted as a tree planted by living water that bears much fruit and remains healthy in all seasons. The blessed man is contrasted with the “wicked man” who is depicted as chaff blown away by the wind. The only major difference is that Psalm 1 focuses on *delighting in God’s word*, while Jeremiah 17:5-8 focuses on *trusting in God alone*.

5) Two Baskets of Figs – Ch.24

The most controversial aspect of Jeremiah's message was that the Babylonian captivity *was God's judgment and therefore the people should willingly surrender willingly to Babylon*. Jeremiah was branded a traitor for this message. Yet, God saw it like this:

The LORD showed me two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple of the LORD. One basket had very good figs, like those that ripen early; the other basket had very bad figs, so bad they could not be eaten . . . This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: "Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land . . . But like the bad figs, which are so bad they cannot be eaten," says the LORD, "so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse and an object of ridicule, wherever I banish them. I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their ancestors" (24:2-10).

The "good figs" were those who would submit to God's discipline and go willingly into captivity to Babylon. God would bless and protect His people there. The "bad figs" were those who would rebel against His divine discipline and choose instead to flee to Egypt. They will suffer even worse discipline there. In the Book of Lamentations, Jeremiah spoke about accepting God's discipline:

"It is good for people to submit at an early age to the yoke of His discipline: Let them sit alone in silence beneath the LORD's demands . . . For no one is abandoned by the Lord forever. Though He brings grief, He also shows compassion because of the greatness of His unfailing love" (Lamentations 3:27-32).

Sometimes what God is asking of us can seem 'counter-intuitive'. The Israelites, who really listened to the reason behind God's way, and were willing to submit to it, even not fully understanding it all, were saved and protected, even during the Babylonian captivity. We too can "walk by faith" when the pressure to go our own way, or someone else's way for us seems to make more sense. This takes an enormous amount of trust in God and His faithfulness, and the wisdom of those we go to for advice. Be willing to go against the tide and take some heat at times! Jesus certainly did. Jeremiah did too. You will be in good company.

Additional Pictures from Jeremiah

There are many more pictures in Jeremiah. Here are a few more (without the Scripture passages):

The Ruined Underwear – Ch.13

Jeremiah had to wear some “underwear” and then go bury it in Babylon until it was ruined, then dig it up and show it to Israel! Just as the “linen belt” clung to a man’s waist, so God had bound Israel close to Himself in a covenant relationship. But Israel did not cling to God; rather, they turned to other gods. Thus, they would go into captivity in Babylon (by the Euphrates, where Jeremiah buried his underwear) and their glory would be ruined.

The Potter’s Vessel – Ch.18

Jeremiah watched a potter making a clay pot. He saw the pot ruined and then reshaped by the potter. Just as the potter has authority over the clay to mold any kind of vessel he desires, so God can fashion calamity *or* rescue for His people. It is His divine prerogative, depending on what He sees in the hearts of His people. If His people humble themselves and turn back to Him, He will bring them blessing instead of calamity.

God’s Council – Ch.23

God depicts a council meeting with His prophets. In the council of the Lord, He gives each of them His messages that He wants delivered to His people. Yet, the false prophets speak without first sitting in God’s council to receive His words! They speak only from their own visions and the imaginations of their own hearts (and for the sake of their own selfish gain). Thus, God will bring harsh judgments down upon the prophets who harm people by speaking only their own thoughts.

Jeremiah’s Yoke – Ch.27,28

God told Jeremiah to wear a yoke around his neck (like the yoke used to harness an animal for work) as a sign that the people should accept the yoke of Babylonian authority over them for the 70 years and leave their land willingly. A false prophet named Hananiah broke Jeremiah’s yoke in the presence of the people, as if to say: “We will escape from the Babylonians.” God sent Jeremiah with a special message for Hananiah: “*You have broken the yoke of wood and made a yoke of iron instead*” (28:13)! That same year, Hananiah died for making the people trust in a lie!

Purchased Field – Ch.32

Jeremiah remained in prison, even as the Babylonians laid siege to the city under king Zedekiah. At this time, God told Jeremiah to buy a field from his uncle's son, which he did. Jeremiah had Baruch bury the deed for the land in a container in the field, with full assurance that someday the people would return to that very land and could claim their inheritance. Jeremiah prays a long prayer worshipping God for this promise of a future. God responds to his prayer, confirming both the reason for the impending judgment *and* the certainty of their future hope.

Sun and Moon – Ch.33

God remains faithful, even if His people are faithless. He will fulfill His promises. The future will be glorious, and God's righteous King will reign over Israel. The fulfillment of the Davidic covenant was promised to King David, that Messiah would be an eternal yet human king from his family line. This promise is as certain as the covenant (promise) God made to Noah (Genesis 8:22) that will bring each day with a rising sun and each night with a rising moon.

Jonadab and his faithful descendants – Ch.35

Jonadab the Rechabite had descendants for many generations who remained loyal to their father's vows. They were willing to abide by the commitment to not ever drink alcohol, or live in actual built homes, only tents. Both of those were common to the people of Israel, but this family was commanded to be different. God used this family to show the Israelites that if a family line was willing to be faithful to their ancestor's vows and heritage, then why couldn't God's children remain loyal to their vows and covenant to Him?

Discussion Questions

1. What stands out most to you concerning Jeremiah as a person – his life, his calling, his struggles, his emotions, etc.?
2. Of the many pictures from Jeremiah, which one grabs your attention the most? Why?
3. If you had to “picture” your relationship with God right now, how would you picture it? What analogy or parable would you use?