

# GOD WITH US

## Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return *Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness*

### Message 6 – Jeremiah: A Portrait of God

#### Introduction

The message of Jeremiah was painfully simple: Judah would go into captivity to Babylon because of disobedience to the covenant with Yahweh. Those who submitted to this divine discipline (i.e. surrender willingly to Babylon) would be protected and cared for by God. Those who refused to yield would face more severe consequences for their rebellion, no matter where they ran for protection. This was a very difficult message for Jeremiah to deliver, because the people wanted someone to bring them “better news.” As a result, Jeremiah was despised and persecuted by the people, priests, prophets and kings. It was also a painful message for Jeremiah to deliver because his natural disposition was such that he longed for the love and affection of his countrymen, which he never received. Thus, the “weeping prophet” served God’s purposes in his generation at great cost to himself.

In the previous section of our study we surveyed several of the most vivid pictures from the book of Jeremiah – pictures that summarize the message of God to His people. In our current study, we will look at the hearts of 3 main characters: Baruch, Jeremiah and God.

#### **Baruch: Seeking the “great things” of God.**

Very few people have a chapter of the Bible where God speaks directly and personally to their own heart. Baruch was one such person. A little background will help us understand God’s very personal message to this man.

Baruch was a young man of noble descent. He was Jeremiah’s personal assistant and scribe (secretary), the one responsible for writing down all the words of Jeremiah on scrolls.

***“Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD which He had spoken to him” (36:4).***

Based on the time references (36:1 and 36:9) we can estimate that

it took Baruch roughly 1-1/2 years to record all that Jeremiah had said! After all of this scribal work, it was Baruch who read from Jeremiah's scroll of prophecies to the people, since Jeremiah was imprisoned and could not do so.

***“So you go and read from the scroll which you have written at my dictation the words of the LORD to the people in the Lord's house on a fast day” (36:6).***

As we know, Jeremiah was hated by all, thus Baruch was also hated, by virtue of close connection to Jeremiah and his message. In fact, at one point the leaders accused Baruch of being the driving force behind Jeremiah's pro-Babylonian message! Here is what they said to Jeremiah:

***“Baruch the son of Neriah is inciting you against us to give us over into the hand of the Babylonians, so they will put us to death or exile us to Babylon” (43:3).***

Apparently, Baruch's stature in society was significant enough that he was regarded as a strong influence behind the message of Jeremiah. (Although this was not the case; it was God, not Baruch, who was “inciting” Jeremiah to speak).

After Baruch publicly read Jeremiah's prophecies at the temple to the people, he was summoned to the king's house to read the scroll to the court officials of king Jehoiakim. They were shocked at the dire prophecies and decided that the king must hear them himself. They told Baruch to go and hide himself, knowing that the king might seek to kill him after hearing the terrifying prophecies.

***Then the officials said to Baruch, “Go, hide yourself, you and Jeremiah, and do not let anyone know where you are” (36:19).***

As expected, Jehoiakim did not receive well the warnings and prophecies of Jeremiah. He took the scroll and cut it up in pieces as it was read, throwing the these into the fireplace! At the end, he commanded that Baruch and Jeremiah be arrested.

***“And the king commanded Jerahmeel the king's son, Seraiah the son of Azriel, and Shelemiah the son of Abdeel to seize Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet, but the LORD hid them” (36:26).***

We do not know *how* “the Lord hid them” from the wrath of king Jehoiakim; but we do know what the Lord told Jeremiah and Baruch to do during this period of hiding. They were to take

another scroll and re-write *all the same prophecies* along with *many more words* (a long and painstaking task).

***“Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the son of Neriah, the scribe, and he wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them” (36:32).***

We can assume that the time it took to make a new scroll exceeded the time for the first scroll, since many more words were added. This mean that Baruch gave **more that 3 years** to writing the words of Jeremiah.

With this background, we can better understand the heart and tone behind God’s personal message to Baruch, which came to him as he was painstakingly rewriting all the words of Jeremiah on another scroll. The message came from God through Jeremiah:

***This is the message which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he had written down these words in a book at Jeremiah’s dictation, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying: “Thus says the LORD the God of Israel to you, O Baruch: ‘You said, “Ah, woe is me! For the LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning and have found no rest”” (45:1-3).***

First, we note that *God saw the inner sorrows and longings* of this man, Baruch. He saw that Baruch was burdened by the fact that his last scroll (1-1/2 years work) had been burned by the king. His work seemed wasted. And now he was sitting in some lonely hiding place (an additional 1-1/2+ years) writing another scroll, with many *more words*. Baruch was weary with his groaning . . . and he had found no rest.

*How encouraging it is to see that GOD KNOWS the deepest longings and struggles of our hearts. He knows us intimately and fully. He knows our every thought before we even put words to those thoughts. God wants us to bring all our deepest and most painful emotions into relationship with Him. He cares for us. He understands us. And He has plans for each of us, even in our darkest, most pain-filled days.*

Second, we note that *God had a specific message for Baruch, to strengthen him and give him the courage to continue on.*

***Thus you are to say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Behold, what I have built I am about to tear down, and what I have planted I am about to uproot, that is, the whole land.” But you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I am going to bring disaster on all flesh,’ declares the LORD, ‘but I will give your life to you as booty in all the places where you may go’” (45:4,5).***

God asked Baruch a very searching question: “*Are you seeking great things for yourself?*” We may well imagine that Baruch was questioning the value of his life and his work with Jeremiah and was tempted to seek something better for his life. After all, he was born into a noble family; yet he seemed to be doing such ignoble work. Should he not, along with his friends, be pursuing great plans for his future? Instead, he was hiding away with a hated prophet re-writing Hebrew words that might just end up in the fireplace like the previous words. He questioned his place in the world, and in the plans of God. Wasn’t there something better?

God gave Baruch a very clear answer: *Don’t long for a high position in a doomed kingdom!* The nation was about to be destroyed and all its leaders would either die or go into captivity in chains. All of Baruch’s peers, those young nobles pursuing “great plans” for themselves, would see those plans come to *nothing*. But Baruch would be granted life “*in all the places where he would go.*” God would protect and provide for his servant. (God did not mention the fact that this second longer scroll would survive and become one of the greatest books in human history!)

*What is SUCCESS? Success is doing the will of God regardless of the results. We can pursue that version of success no matter who we are or where we are. We simply need to ask the question: God, how can I serve You faithfully today, right where You have me? A mother who is called to be at home raising a family can be just as faithful a servant of God as a missionary serving on a foreign field. The key is NOT succumbing to the temptation to “pursue great things for ourselves,” rather, to pursue the great things that God wants to do with us – to be faithful to His assignments, big or small, tedious or exciting.*

The last mention of Baruch shows him being dragged to Egypt along with Jeremiah (against their will) by those who stubbornly refused to heed God’s command not to go there.

***“And they took Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah along with them. So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the LORD and went as far as Tahpanhes” (43:6,7).***

Baruch remained faithful to God’s challenge. He remained loyal to Jeremiah, no matter the cost to himself. God protected them both, even in Egypt!

*Baruch is an example of a younger man being a faithful servant to an older man. Joshua was the faithful servant to Moses, yet with a very different calling. Young Timothy came alongside the aged apostle Paul. John Mark was a servant and helper to the apostle Peter. Some of these “minor characters” ended up playing “major roles” in the story of God (even though this was not clear to them at the time). How does Baruch’s life inspire you to be faithful? What has God given you to do at the present time? Remember – Success is defined by your faithfulness, not the prominence of your role.*

### **Jeremiah: Tender and Tough**

***“Woe to me, my mother, that you have borne me as a man of strife and a man of contention to all the land” (15:10).***

Jeremiah was an unusual prophet. He was very tender-hearted, thus he *felt his message* at a very deep level (which made it very difficult to deliver his message over many decades). His heart was desperately sick over the spiritual condition of his people. He was as broken *emotionally* as they were broken *spiritually*.

***“My sorrow is beyond healing, my heart is faint within me . . . For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored” (8:18-22)?***

Gilead was a place in Israel known for its production of healing ointments, and physicians worked there. Yet, Jeremiah was unable to find a *“balm in Gilead”* that could heal the peoples’ sick hearts. He could not find a doctor that could restore the health of his people. Not even his own words seemed effective in calling the people back to God, their true healer. Thus, his own sorrow was *“beyond healing.”*

Because of his calling to be the mouthpiece of God, Jeremiah was constantly caught between two deep, driving forces: 1) He was

compelled to faithfully pour forth the difficult words of God to his people; yet 2) he deeply desired the affection and friendship of his people, which he was continually denied *because of his God-given message*. He was labeled at “traitor,” even though he was the ultimate “patriot” in his heart of hearts. Thus, Jeremiah often felt abandoned by both God and man. Two of Jeremiah’s “laments” highlight this tension in his heart between his God-given calling (to bear a tough message) and his natural disposition (to be tender-hearted).

***“Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts. I did not sit in the circle of merry-makers, nor did I exult. Because of Your hand upon me I sat alone, for You filled me with indignation. Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Your help seems as uncertain as a seasonal brook, like a spring that has gone dry” (15:16-18)?***

Notice his obedience to the call of God to be His messenger. He made sacrifices, especially in terms of his friendships, in order to remain faithful to his calling. Yet, this resulted in loneliness and great emotional pain. At times, he felt as if he had been ‘tricked’ by God into this calling.

***“O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction, because for me the word of the LORD has resulted in reproach and derision all day long. But if I say, “I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,” then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it. For I have heard the whispering of many, “Terror on every side! Denounce him; yes, let us denounce him!” All my trusted friends, watching for my fall, say: “Perhaps he will be deceived, so that we may prevail against him and take our revenge on him” (20:7-10).***

I am so glad that the Bible does not gloss over the more difficult and even weak moments of its greatest characters. Here we see Jeremiah lamenting the pain that God’s calling was producing in his life. As a result, God had to call his chosen prophet to “repent” (i.e., reaffirm and recommit to his calling to serve God in spite of

his feelings to the contrary).

***Therefore, thus says the LORD, “If you return, then I will restore you—before Me you will stand; and if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman. They for their part may turn to you, but as for you, you must not turn to them. Then I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; and though they fight against you, they will not prevail over you; for I am with you to save you and deliver you,” declares the LORD. “So I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent” (15:19-21).***

The record of Jeremiah’s life tells us that he *did* keep *repenting* (returning to the Lord) in spite of his tremendous struggles with his calling. His life became more and more difficult as the nation moved closer and closer to the Babylonian invasion; but he did not give up. Indeed, God made this gentle man a “*fortified wall of bronze*” that the opposing forces could not prevail against.

*It is encouraging to see that God can use a man like Jeremiah to do the great work that he did. God can use any of us, if we yield our lives to His purposes. Yes, living out God’s plan may be difficult and may stretch us to our limits; but God will be faithful to carry us through whatever He calls us to do. Are you holding back on yielding fully to God because you are afraid that you are not capable of fulfilling His calling? When you fully yield to God and allow Him to work in and through you, you will be truly amazed to learn that He “is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20).*

Why did God choose such a tender-hearted man like Jeremiah to bear such a tough message of judgment? Probably because the *heart of this man best reflected the heart of God Himself: tender and tough. God incarnated His message in the messenger.* The personality of Jeremiah humanly depicted the heart and emotions of God – passionately zealous for His people, yet righteously possessive of His ransomed jewel. As every parent learns, no matter how passionate the parental love, inevitable discipline must come if constant warnings and chances are rejected. Jeremiah represented the heartfelt struggle of God . . . between His deep desire to lovingly restore His people to Himself, and His need to discipline His people for their refusal to return to Him.

It should not surprise us that there were so many similarities between Jeremiah and Jesus that *many people thought Jesus was Jeremiah reincarnated!* (See Matt.16:13,14). Warren Wiersbe points out many of the parallels: *“The ministries of both Jeremiah and Jesus were rejected by the people and both men wept over the city of Jerusalem because they knew that destruction was coming. Both were hated without cause and both were ridiculed by the leaders. Jeremiah was rejected by his family, and Jesus by His family. Both emphasized a ‘heart religion’ and not just ritual, and both taught by means of visual images and used common objects and activities to instruct the people. Jeremiah ended up in Egypt and Jesus on a Roman cross. In their day, both were considered miserable failures, but history has proved that both were right.”*

### **God: With all My heart and all My soul!**

It is fascinating to see two very different sides of the character of God as revealed through the life and ministry of Jeremiah. On the one hand, we see the tremendous *love of God* for His people. On the other hand, we see the *justice of God* in that He will no longer allow His people to blatantly and stubbornly rebel against Him.

Throughout the book there are passages that reveal God’s deep emotions:

***Thus says the LORD, “I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the first of His harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them,” declares the LORD” (2:1-3).***

God loved Israel so much that He would fiercely protect her against all who would seek to “devour her.” She was precious in His sight!

Yet, God reveals deep sadness that His precious bride has forgotten Him, not even recalling her bridal attire.

***“Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number” (2:32).***

But this bride has done more than “forgetting” her husband; she has treacherously departed and run off with other lovers.

***“You said, ‘It is hopeless! For I have loved strangers, and I must go after them’” (2:25).***

***“Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, so you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,” declares the LORD . . . They have forgotten the LORD their God” (3:20,21).***

Nevertheless, even at this late hour God still pleads to His bride to return to Him so that He can forgive and restore her to Himself.

***“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the LORD, “I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful,” declares the LORD, “I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,” declares the LORD. “Return, faithless people,” declares the LORD, “for I am your husband” (3:12-14).***

But she will not return to Him. Although God expresses deep anguish over His decision, He asks three times the same question:

***“Should I not punish them for this?” declares the LORD. “Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this? (5:9; 9:9; 9:29).***

With great sadness, God gives His beloved over to plunderers who will ruin her. The coming Babylonian invasion is described in vivid terms that sent horror into the hearts of Jeremiah’s audience:

***“Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem: ‘Sound the trumpet throughout the land!’ Cry aloud and say: ‘Gather together! Let us flee to the fortified cities!’ Raise the signal to go to Zion! Flee for safety without delay! For I am bringing disaster from the north, even terrible destruction. A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out. He has left his place to lay waste your land. Your towns will lie in ruins without inhabitant. So put on sackcloth, lament and wail, for the fierce anger of the LORD has not turned away from us. “In that day,” declares the LORD, “the king and the officials will lose heart, the priests will be horrified, and the prophets will be appalled” (4:5-9).***

Sadly, Israel was given over to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. due to centuries of stubborn refusal to heed the terms of their covenant with Yahweh. Yet, this 70-year captivity in Babylon was *not the final word from Jeremiah concerning God’s plan for His people.*

***“They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—the grain, the new wine***

*and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow” (31:10-14).*

*“Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, Virgin Israel, return to your towns. How long will you wander, unfaithful Daughter Israel? The LORD will create a new thing on earth—the woman will return to the man” (31:21,22).*

Yes, the day of divine discipline was coming upon God’s unfaithful bride, Israel. But because of God’s unfailing love, there were brighter days ahead. This future hope caused Jeremiah not only to be the weeping prophet, but also the hopeful prophet, and to utter these famous lines in his book of Lamentations:

*“I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him. The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (Lamentations 3:19-26).*

God IS faithful to His covenant promises. This means that He is faithful *both* to bless us in our obedience *and* to discipline us in our disobedience. Jeremiah would live to see Israel destroyed. But in his visions and his prophecies, he saw Israel being restored by the hand of his all-merciful God.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the biggest lesson that you took away from the life of Baruch?
2. What is the biggest lesson that you took away from the life of Jeremiah?
3. How does Jeremiah’s message about God’s hand of judgment and discipline impact you?
4. How does Jeremiah’s message about God’s faithfulness and mercy encourage you?