

## The good, the bad and the ugly - Jeremiah

### SLIDE 2

#### What do you think of when you think of Jeremiah?

- Prophet of doom. The weeping prophet.
- According to tradition, Jeremiah authored the Book of Jeremiah, the Books of Kings and the Book of Lamentations.
- Lamentations is good for depression. The person who wrote it comes across as a manic depressive. If you think God can't relate to your depression and anxiety, read Lamentations.
- That a book like that is in the Bible just speaks more of the Bible's accessibility to anyone.
  
- God came to Jeremiah when he was just 13 years old.
- Jeremiah resisted the call by complaining that he was only a child and did not know how to speak (Jeremiah 1:6). Where have you heard that before? Which other great Old Testament leader said pretty much the same thing? (Moses)
- However, God insisted that Jeremiah go and speak, and he touched Jeremiah's mouth to place the word of the Lord there (Jeremiah 1:9).
- He lived at a time when Jerusalem was about to fall to the Babylonian Empire, one of the most powerful empires the world has ever seen.
- Jeremiah's ministry was active from the thirteenth year of Josiah, king of Judah 626 BC, until after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 587 BC.
- So it was a major, major time in the history of the people of God.
- Jeremiah was born into a world of violence and intense power struggles.
- Jeremiah was called by God to give prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction. This was because Israel had been unfaithful to the laws of the covenant and had forsaken God by worshiping Baal. The people of Israel had even gone as far as building high altars to Baal in order to burn their children in fire as offerings.
- Jeremiah warned that if the rulers continued to neglect God's desire for justice, that the nation would fall to the Babylonian Empire.
- Israel had deviated so far from God that they had broken the covenant, causing God to withdraw his blessings.
- This is something that Christians who blindly support Israel at any cost need to hear. God actually withdraws his blessings from Israel when they don't live what they were called to do.

- Jeremiah was guided by God to proclaim that the nation of Judah would be faced with famine, plundered and taken captive by foreigners who would exile them to a foreign land.
- The kings and their people neglected to care for the poor, the weak, and the sick. They also exploited the poor to give more money to the rich. Jeremiah hated that the rulers didn't care for the immigrant in their midst.
- Jeremiah said this was going to happen unless the people changed their ways.
- When he referred to the people, he meant the rulers, not the ordinary people. This is where much judgmentalism often happens when we talk about prophecy in the Bible.
- The rulers were the ones who led the people into idolatry, and Jeremiah critiques that.
- It was the rulers that Jeremiah railed against, for not caring about the poor, not caring about justice, and just caring about stocking up the wealth of the already rich.
- The rulers actually taxed the poor to give more money to the king and his friends.
- There are striking similarities to what we see in so much of the world today, and Jeremiah's message is that unless they change their ways, the nation will fall.
- Jeremiah lived under a ruler who oppressed his people, who oppressed people wanting to come into his country, who oppressed women. He lived under a ruler who didn't care for the orphans or the needy.
- He lived under a ruler who incited violence amongst his people.
- He wept and he yelled and nobody would listen to his voice.
- When I thought about this, I thought that, in the 2,500 years since Jeremiah, not much has changed.
- I find that today when you speak about issues of justice to Christians, many don't want to hear it. When you post something on Facebook about that is about an issue of justice, you might get a few likes, and occasionally more and quite a few comments. But if you post something about a fluffy dog or something funny, you will get a whole lot of likes and laughing emojis. We just don't care enough about the state of the world often.

### SLIDE 3

Who are some of the 'Jeremiah's' in today's culture, and how are they viewed by the church or by the culture?

- But Jeremiah did more than speak against the rulers. He spoke for a better world. He spoke for God's vision where rulers cared for those in need.
- This is the theme all the way through the Bible. From the creation story in Genesis all the way through to the new creation in Revelation, there is the theme of God being in the business of renewing the world.
- Isaiah, who lived in a similar time, spoke about the day when God would renew all things, and Jeremiah did the same.

#### SLIDE 4

##### Isaiah 65:17-25

- Jeremiah spoke words of doom, but he also spoke words of hope, if only the rulers would change their oppressive ways.
- The prophets of the Old Testament all lived in a period of about 400 years, and they all had pretty much the same calling from God.

#### SLIDE 5

##### What are some of the characteristics of the biblical prophets?

- Overwhelmingly, what they say is more prescriptive than predictive. We often see the prophets as somehow predicting the future, like a Nostradamus. But the biblical prophets don't do much of that.
- There has been a lot of terrible interpretation of what they have said, and some of it is predictive, but when it is that, it is always in a context of how the people of God should live.
- There were conspiracies to kill him, and when he complains to God about his persecution, God tells him it's only going to get worse.
- He was then beaten and put in stocks.
- After this, Jeremiah expresses lament over the difficulty that speaking God's word has caused him and regrets becoming a laughingstock and the target of mockery.
- Jeremiah is human. He's not a willing martyr. He has a healthy sense of self-worth. He doesn't enjoy being persecuted. But he is faithful. It doesn't stop him from doing what is right.
- Prophets are often misunderstood, persecuted (mostly by their own people).
- Prophets often get most of their criticism from their own people. I know people like John Smith have said that by far most of their criticism comes from the church.
- Jesus was the same - the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

- They care more about God and the things of God than anything else. And isn't that what we're all called to?
- They show that the ways of God are counter to the culture. They speak into the culture.
- They say what is often not popular; they don't tell us what we want to hear. They don't care what people think of them; they aren't swayed by that. They are courageous.
- He recounts how if he tries to shut the word of the Lord inside and not mention God's name, the word becomes like fire in his heart and he is unable to hold it in.
- Prophets are known for having the fire of the Holy Spirit in them. They speak boldly.
- They disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. God is more interested in your character than your comfort.
- They reveal the character of God, the heart of God who comforts the outsider, includes the excluded and loves the unloveable. That's why they speak out so strongly against injustice; they reveal God's overwhelming passion for justice.
- They are prepared to look stupid because of what's right.
- They have an overwhelming desire to bring the people back to God.
- They feel for God in a way.

#### SLIDE 6

- What aspects of Jeremiah do you see in Jesus?
- What are some things that Christians are called to be prophetic about today?
- What are some movements that we could find out about? Love Makes A Way, Christian Peacemaker teams.
- Whilst Jeremiah was prophesying the coming destruction, a number of other prophets were prophesying peace. Jeremiah spoke against these other prophets.

#### SLIDE 7

Jeremiah 6:13-15

Also Jeremiah 14:14-16, 23:9-40, 27-28, Lam. 2:14

- Jesus spoke about false prophets who always told the people what they wanted to hear. True prophets are often unpopular and are often killed.
- Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Victor Jara. All killed.

- No one wants to be unpopular, but the prophets show us that being popular matters less than doing what is right.
  - Jeremiah also experienced additional persecutions.
  - After Jeremiah prophesied that Jerusalem would be handed over to the Babylonian army, the king's officials, including Pashur the priest, tried to convince King Zedekiah that Jeremiah should be put to death because he was discouraging the soldiers as well as the people.
  - The way of the prophet is so often against the ways of military power. This is so strong in the US where to criticise the military is just about blasphemous.
  - The prophet is never on the side of empire.
  - Zedekiah answered that he would not oppose them. Consequently, the king's officials took Jeremiah and put him down into a cistern, where he sank down into the mud.
  - The intent seemed to be to kill Jeremiah by allowing him to starve to death in a manner designed to allow the officials to claim to be innocent of his blood.
  - A Cushite rescued Jeremiah by pulling him out of the cistern, but Jeremiah remained imprisoned until Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army in 587 BC.
  - The Babylonians (the occupying power) released Jeremiah, and showed him great kindness, allowing Jeremiah to choose the place of his residence, according to a Babylonian edict.
  - It's ironic that it was the enemy that showed him kindness.
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- Jeremiah was a good man. The bad and the ugly was in what he had to expose. The ugliness was the injustice and the way the poor and immigrants were treated by the rulers.
  - Ultimately, being prophetic comes out of a passionate, aching love of God and for God's love and justice in the world.
  - Jeremiah showed that and lived it. The prophet lives what they preach, they don't care what others think of them. They are prepared to look like a fool for the sake of what is right.
  - They are prepared to put everything on the line because nothing is more important to them than the way of love. They eat, sleep and breathe the kingdom of God, but in a way that is relevant to the time and that speaks to the very heart of what is ailing the society they live in.
  - They cut through all the rubbish and get to the heart of the issue; they are not 'nice', they don't say what people want to hear, they don't worry about reputations, particularly their own.

- That's why Jeremiah spoke out like he did. He ached for God's justice and love to be made real in his culture, and he was wild with rage when the very people who were entrusted with doing that, the people of God themselves, were doing the opposite and trampling on God's poor, on the outcast and the vulnerable ones, the ones God has a special heart for.
- In the end, the prophet of God is a prophet of hope.

#### SLIDE 8

*"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice"*

*- Martin Luther King*

- Just like a modern day prophet, Martin Luther King, said about 50 years ago, the arc of the moral universe is long but bends towards justice.
- They long for a better day, they believe in a better day; they believe in the day when God will bring everything together in a new heavens and a new earth, when justice will finally be fully here, when people won't get ripped off anymore, when the first will be last and the last will be first.