

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

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FOREWORD

This book is not a commentary on the Book of Jeremiah, but an outline of his personality, life, and service. Characterized by faithfulness and obedience in a time of weakness and confusion, Jeremiah spoke the final words of Jehovah in Jerusalem, where He had placed “the remembrance of His name”, before this city was destroyed. Soon afterward began “the times of the Gentiles,” a period which continues to the present and will last until Israel finally acknowledges its Messiah.

Jeremiah was a weak and timid man, but God’s power worked in him. As one has said, “What matters is not knowing the ambassador, but knowing the Power that sends him. Those who despise him despise not the man, but the One who sends him” (W. Kelly). The tragedy of this prophet lay in his constant obligation to forewarn of judgment while his whole inner self recoiled from such a prospect.

How different our part! To us is given the opportunity to present the gospel of grace and salvation through our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 1 – FAMILY AND CALLING

1. Family (Jer.1:1)

Although known as a prophet, Jeremiah belonged to the family of “the priests that were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.” As far as we know, he never acted as a priest. His village of Anathoth, a little over three miles northeast of Jerusalem, had been given to the priests, descendants of Aaron, of the family of the Kohathites (Josh. 21:18; 1 Chron. 6:60). Abiathar the priest was from Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26). In Zerubbabel’s time the village was repopled by 128 of its inhabitants who had returned from captivity as a result of the edict of Cyrus, king of Persia. Jeremiah, although a Levite, was regarded as a Benjaminite since his birthplace lay in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin.

He was the son of Hilkiyah. Was his father the high priest frequently mentioned during the reign of Josiah, or was he another Hilkiyah? We do not know for sure. Let us remember, however, the following points about Hilkiyah the high priest. In 1 Chronicles 6:13 he is named in the list of Aaron’s descendants. Gemariah his son is often mentioned by Jeremiah (for instance, in 29:3). Ezra, the scribe, was one of his descendants.

Hilkiyah is especially known for having, along with Shaphan, recovered the book of the Law. In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, five years after Jeremiah began to prophesy, Hilkiyah and Shaphan had collected the money gathered by the people and brought into the house of Jehovah to pay for the work performed on the temple. On this occasion the high priest finds the book of the Law in the house of Jehovah (2 Kings 22:3-8). Josiah, very impressed after hearing the words of the book, sends Hilkiyah, Shaphan, and some others to Huldah the prophetess to receive from her mouth the word of the Lord in this respect. Huldah can only confirm the chastisements announced in the book toward the people that were abandoning God. However, the king humbled himself and, as a result, the judgment was suspended during the rest of his life.

Josiah took deeply to heart every instruction of the Scriptures, especially those of Deuteronomy. He read to the people “all the words of the

book of the covenant” (2 Kings 23:1-31). Then he commanded that all the vessels that had been gathered and used for idolatrous purposes be brought out of the temple and burned (v. 4). He abolished the high places in the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem. He ordered that the Asherah be brought out from the house of Jehovah and burned at the torrent Kidron. He abolished institutionalized prostitution in the temple, and tore down the houses used for this purpose. Gradually, he purified the entire country. He even carried out the prophecy of the man of God who was sent to Bethel in the time of King Jeroboam (1 Kings 13) to announce that the bones of the priests of the high places would be burned on an altar.

Once the country had been purified, Josiah commanded that the Passover be held in Jerusalem. The worship of God was restored and everything pertaining to idolatry and the occult was destroyed, in order to “perform the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkijah the priest had found in the house of Jehovah.”

Let us focus our attention once again on Jeremiah. Whether or not his father actually was the high priest, there is no doubt that he feared the Lord and His Word. On the other hand, Jeremiah’s family did not accept his prophecy, for we read, “Even thy brethren, and the house of thy father, even they have dealt treacherously with thee, even they have cried aloud after thee” (Jer. 12:6). Jeremiah never married in accordance with God’s command: “You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place” (Jer. 16:2).

Disgraced by his brethren, Jeremiah led a solitary life, having neither wife nor children. This loneliness was a heavy burden for him. However, he occasionally enjoyed the support of friends who stood up for him. In all this he is a type of the One who was to come later - the humble, solitary Man who was rejected by His brethren in spite of all the grace he displayed.

2. Background (Jer.1:2-3)

Jeremiah prophesied in Jerusalem and Judah during the 41 year period from 629 to 588 BC. The word came to him “in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign ... also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah . . . until the carrying away of Jerusalem captive.” After the final deportation, he continued his service in relative obscurity among the poor of

the country whom Nebuchadnezzar had left. Subsequently he followed into Egypt the remnant of the people who took refuge in that country. Very probably he died there after having given his last known prophecy (Jer. 44).

Thus Jeremiah witnessed the entire sad history of the last kings of Judah.

After the death of Josiah, three of his sons and one of his grandsons ascended to the throne. First Jehoahaz, his third son, reigned for three months. Afterwards Jehoiakim, Josiah's eldest son, occupied the throne for eleven years. Jehoiakim's eighteen year-old son, Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah) reigned for three months and ten days. Zedekiah, the last son of Josiah, at the age of 21 replaced his nephew on the throne and reigned eleven years. Among the descendants of Jehoiachin, the grandson of Josiah, we find a Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2; Hag. 2:2) or Salathiel (Matt. 1:12). This man was the father or grandfather of Zerubbabel, governor of Israel at the time of the return from captivity in accordance with the edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1 & 2).

JOSIAH		
JEHOAHAZ	JEHOIAKIM	ZEDEKIAH
third son	(eldest son)	youngest son
(3 months)	(11 years)	(11 years)
JEHOIACHIN (JECONIAH)		
(3months, 10 days)		
SHEALTIEL		
ZERUBBABEL		

Josiah reigned thirty-one years. It was during the thirteenth year of his reign that Jeremiah began to prophesy. The following eighteen years were a relatively easy period in the prophet's life. The degree to which he felt the king's death is well expressed in 2 Chronicles 35:25, "And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah." These lamentations have not been kept for us.ⁱ

After Josiah, Judah sank into religious and political decadence. None of the descendants of this pious king feared the Lord. Invasions from the

north increased in number. Three consecutive times the enemy looted the country and returned to Babylon with their captives and their treasures, including the vessels of the house of Jehovah (2 Chron. 36:7). The departure of these vessels marks the beginning of the “time of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24). Daniel and his companions were carried away into captivity at that time. (Dan. 1:1, 2, 6).

Habakkuk and Zephaniah prophesied in Judah during Jeremiah’s time. Daniel and Ezekiel, also prophets during this time, ministered in Babylon. In His grace, God was still speaking to His people despite their accumulated sins and hardened hearts. But they did not pay attention.

3. Calling (Jer.1.9-10)

What a memorable day in the life of Jeremiah when God spoke to him, establishing him as a prophet! The calling of Isaiah had been different. Seeing the Lord on His throne in the midst of Seraphim proclaiming His holiness, Isaiah had cried, “Woe is me, for I am undone!” But the glowing coal taken from the altar where the victim had been burned provided propitiation for his sins. Then he could answer the Lord’s call: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” with the words, “Here am I! Send me.” (Isa. 6:1-8)

Nothing like this happened to Jeremiah. God simply spoke to him in his early youth declaring in a few precise statements why He chose to send him: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:4-10). This is God’s foreknowledge. For us it is connected with His election before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:2; Eph. 1:4). The motives of this great plan are not revealed to us.

But to Jeremiah the Lord revealed more, “Before you were born I sanctified you.” Like the apostle Paul, Jeremiah was set apart from his mother’s womb (see Gal. 1:4, Acts 9:15; 22:14). Then God spoke further to him, “I ordained you a prophet to the nations,” and finally “I shall send you.”

These passages seem to show that from past eternity there has been an election on God’s part. Furthermore, each servant of the Lord receives a definite call. This is followed by training in “the school of God” through various means before the servant is actually engaged in service (see Gal. 2:1).

Jeremiah, still quite young, is frightened at the prospect of this divinely appointed mission. He meekly protests, "Ah, Lord God! Behold I cannot speak, for I am a youth." You will recall that Moses, when much older, made the same objection when the Lord chose to send him into Egypt (Ex. 4:10). Amos reminds us that he was not the son of a prophet nor a prophet himself, but a simple and poor shepherd. God, however, had taken him while he was tending the flock, and had said to him, "Go, prophesy unto my people Israel" (Amos 7:14-15). Timothy also was young and timid; nevertheless the apostle wanted Timothy to accompany him (Acts 16:3).

Isn't it true that we make similar objections? Sometimes we feel too young or too ignorant to pray in the presence of others. Often, in fellowship at the Lord's Table, we feel too timid to pray in the assembly! The years go by and we still feel too young or perhaps too inadequate, and we remain silent until middle age and finally old age arrives!

And what about the outward testimony? How often we feel our own inadequacy to speak of the Lord and to let the testimony of His grace shine! We forget that when the Lord invites us to serve in this way, there are resources in Himself sufficient to enable us to respond to His invitation. When the Lord miraculously fed the crowd in the desert, He commanded His disciples, "Give ye them to eat." Hearing this order of the Lord's, the disciples could not understand how five loaves and two fishes could possibly feed so many people. But what did Jesus say? "Bring them here to me." Then He multiplied the meager resources of the disciples and not only satisfied the entire crowd, but had a number of baskets still left over.

As for Jeremiah, the Lord deals with him in the time of his weakness by giving him words of encouragement as well as words of promise. First he gives him the definite order, "You shall go" (Jer. 1:7). He had spoken similarly to Gideon (who thought he was the least in his father's house) with the words, "Go in this might of yours" (Judg. 6:14). God says further to Jeremiah, "Whatever I command you, you shall speak," Then, calming his mind still further He states, "I am with you to deliver you."

This same voice which encouraged Jeremiah and Gideon was heard by the great apostle Paul at Corinth, having arrived there "In weakness, in fear, and in much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). It spoke to him in a night vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you" (Acts 18:9,10).

Jeremiah was not to speak on the basis of what he had in himself, God put forth His hand and touched the young man's mouth saying, "Behold, I

have put my words in your mouth.” God would reveal things to him which he must faithfully transmit to others.

As for us, we should neither expect nor desire revelations, since we possess the entire Scripture which is “profitable for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for instruction.” In his last words to Timothy, the apostle said, “Proclaim the word; be urgent in season and out of season, convict, rebuke, encourage.”

What a contrasting message was to be preached by Jeremiah: “See, I have this day set you ... to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down.” It was the tragic element of his life to constantly prophesy judgment, destruction and captivity.

In some pages of his book, it is true, Jeremiah forecasts a blessing, but this is far off in the future (31:28). The essential part of his message consists of warning the people about the unavoidable judgments which they will endure because of their proud and obstinate hearts.

But our situation as well as our message is much different. “How beautiful are the feet of them that announce glad tidings of peace, of them that announce glad tidings of good things” (Rom. 10:15). Isaiah had had a vision of it, that is, of the feet of Him who announces glad tidings of peace (Isa. 52:7). From that time on, in the steps of the Lord Jesus, how many messengers have been sent to proclaim the same gospel; and, to warn sinners of the dangers threatening them (Heb. 2:3). Jesus entrusted to His disciples and to us after them, the mission to preach in His name “repentance and remission of sins” (Luke 24:47).

When for the first time Peter preached to the nations, he presented Jesus as Judge of living and dead; and concluded by saying, “Whoever believes in Him receives remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). Back in Jerusalem Peter became the object of criticism on the part of the brethren “of the circumcision” who contended with him saying, “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!” The apostle explained how he was led by the Lord. After hearing Peter out, they could only keep silent and conclude that “Then indeed God has to the nations also granted repentance to life.” In his ministry Paul proclaimed the same message, “testifying to both Jews and Greeks repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

A Christian preaching the gospel is expected to warn his hearers of the judgment coming to those who refuse the good tidings. His main purpose,

however, is to present these tidings of grace, whereas Jeremiah's task was primarily to announce judgment and destruction.

In order to encourage His servant, the Lord shows him the rod of an almond tree, a tree which blossoms just about in the middle of winter. In the Hebrew language this tree is called the "watchful" or "vigilant" tree. It reminds us of God who watches over His Word and causes it to be proclaimed "early," as is suggested by the word "arise" so frequently used in the book of Jeremiah. The almond tree reminds us also of Aaron's staff, a dead stick which in one night "had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms" (Num. 17). This is a type of the living power which was in Christ and which raised him from the dead. It is the same power which operates in every believer and causes him to pass from death to life (Eph. 1:19-20)

The vision of the almond tree was encouraging, whereas that of the seething pot filled the prophet with dismay. This "seething pot" ("the face of which is from the north") was about to tip over and spill its contents on the ground. It typified calamity coming from the kingdoms of the north (i.e., Syria and Babylon) and about to break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land. So imminent was the judgment that the prophet was compelled to deliver his message faithfully, however painful it was to him.

The moment comes for the young man to begin his mission. "Therefore prepare yourself and arise, and speak to them" (v. 17). So that he might not be frightened, God presents to him three objects designed to give him confidence: a strong city, an iron pillar, and brazen walls. But He makes it clear to Jeremiah that He is imparting boldness to him, not in favor of the land and of its princes, but "against" the kings of Judah, the priests, and the people of the land (v. 18). Once more, how different with us! To us is imparted the joy of presenting the gospel not "against" those around us, but in their favor.

The Lord renews his promise, "I am with you ... to deliver you." The people and their rulers will undoubtedly fight against the prophet; persecution and suffering will occur, but "They shall not prevail against you."

This assurance of God's presence with him encourages the young prophet and gives him boldness to deliver his message. The same promise accompanied Moses the lawgiver (Ex. 3:13); Gideon the judge (Judg. 6:2); Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the chiefs of the people returned from exile (Hag. 2:4). Likewise, so many others after them, such as Timothy with whom the apostle left this last wish, "The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (2 Tim. 4:22).

Thinking Things Through

1. What attitudes toward God were being held by the people of Judah during Jeremiah's time?
What occurrences during the lifetime of Jeremiah evidenced these attitudes?
How did these things affect Jeremiah?
2. What was Jeremiah's first response to his call?
Do we make the same response to God's calling?
What should our response be and why?
3. What was the nature of the message Jeremiah preached?
How is this message different from the news we bring to the world today?

CHAPTER 2 – BOLDNESS

Boldness was not natural to Jeremiah. Quite the contrary. It was the power of God and of His Spirit alone, at work in the prophet, which induced him to deliver (over the course of so many years) the warnings he was given by the Lord for his people and their rulers.

1. Public Speaking

What a trial for this timid young man to convey publicly to his hearers the word that God had given him for them! Let's mention a few instances.

In chapter 2:1-2 he must "Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord'." In chapter 7:1-2 the test becomes more severe since he must "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the Lord!" Then in the early years of Jehoiakim's reign, having ministered for nineteen years, he is called upon to "Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the Lord's house, all the words that I command you to speak to them." He must not diminish a word. (Jer. 26:1-2).

This involved more than private conversations or talks addressed to a few. Everyone in Jerusalem and in the cities of Judah was to hear the divine warnings by means of a public and general proclamation.

In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom lifts up her voice. "She takes her stand on the top of the high hill, beside the way where the paths meet. She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city, at the entrance of the doors" (Prov. 8:1-3). Although it was prophesied of the Lord Jesus that "He shall not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street", when occasion required it, He would stand and cry, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink" (John 7:37).

A lamp is not lit to be put under a bushel or under a bed, but upon a lamp stand. Its function is to shine so that "they who enter in may see the light." Likewise the "city situated on the top of a mountain cannot be hid"

(Matt. 5:14-15; Luke 8:16). Today believers are exhorted not only to exercise a “holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God,” but they also are a “kingly priesthood to show the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness to his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:5,9).

What a privilege to be able to proclaim the message of grace! What a contrast to Jeremiah’s message of judgment.

2. Messages to the People

In chapter two, the prophet recalls the blessings of former times, “Thus says the Lord: I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness to the Lord, the firstfruits of His increase.” This reminder of the time when Israel left Egypt resembles the period of early conversion. It is much like a young person who has been truly brought to the Lord and is full of joy because of it.

Later the Lord established the people in Canaan: “I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality” (Jer. 2:21). Earlier Isaiah had recalled the care of the Lord for His vineyard (Isa. 5:1,2). Jesus Himself stressed the same care in His parable about the husbandmen (Mark 12:1).

But Israel had already forsaken their God at the very time He was leading them in the way (Jer. 2:17). What a bitter experience it is to forsake God! Because the people were not aware of what they had done, the prophet, as it were, leads them to a hilltop and declares, “See your way in the valley; know what you have done. You are a swift dromedary breaking loose in her ways” (v. 23).

Should we not also look back at every stage of our lives and consider the path already covered? What kind of footsteps have we left behind us? Have we unswervingly followed the Lord, or have we wandered about, seeking our own interest and not the Lord’s?

In chapter 7 the prophet exposes the double life of the people. On one hand they spoke of “The temple of the Lord” as their possession. They did not fail to stand before the Lord in “This house which is called by My name.” They even thought that God had delivered them to continue in their abominations (v. 10). Indeed, they had every appearance of godliness, even to assembling together in the place of God’s choice, but what about their

actual behavior? How much injustice, oppression and idolatry? Because their actions so contradicted their outward profession, judgment, would come upon them and upon their temple.

Does this not resemble the conduct of some of us? Should not each of us consider it before God? Many have been reared within the Christian circle and continue to walk there. They attend assembly meetings and outwardly maintain a Christian life style. However, like the foolish virgins of Matthew 25 who had lamps without oil, they lead a double life which leaves considerable room for the world and its covetousness. What a risk they take – the risk of eventually finding that “The door was shut.”

This explains why Jeremiah had to deliver a message of judgment. Although he exhorted the people to return to “the old paths”(Jer. 6:16) they determined not to do so. Although he reminded them that watchmen had been set over them to warn them, they refused to listen. So He spoke further, “Hear, O earth! Behold I will certainly bring calamity on this people, even the fruit of their thoughts... Behold a people comes from the north country, and a great nation will be raised from the farthest parts of the earth” (vv. 19-25). The seething pot was about to boil over, bringing distress, anguish and terror from the north.

Failing to grasp the situation, the people asked, “Why has the Lord pronounced all this great disaster against us? Or what is our iniquity? Or what is the sin that we have committed?” (16:10). How similar are the words of those who listen to the gospel but do not want to acknowledge that they are guilty and lost. Feeling that they have led a well-ordered and honest life, they forget that man’s worst sin is to reject Christ and His work: “Your fathers have forsaken me ... and have walked after other gods ... and you ... (walk) according to the imagination of your own evil heart ... no one listens to Me” (16:11,12).

This judgment must be announced by Jeremiah time and again throughout his life. In chapter 25 (that is, in the first year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, 607-606 BC) the first year deportation into exile takes place; Daniel is led off to Babylon, and some of the vessels of the temple are carried away. Jeremiah reminds the people that “From the thirteenth year of Josiah ... even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the Lord has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened” (v. 3). God sends them other prophets, but the people also refuse to listen to them or leave their evil ways. Judgment is at the door, and yet they turn a deaf ear to Jeremiah’s warnings.

The seventy-year captivity in Babylon begins in the year 606 as announced by the prophet (25:11), after which a remnant will come back with Zerubbabel in order to rebuild the temple, as related in the first chapters of Ezra. The sacred vessels carried away to Babylon and desecrated by king Belshazzar will be partly brought back (in obedience to the edict of Cyrus) and put in the restored temple (Ezra 1:7-11). These vessels represented the worship rendered to God. The period of seventy years between their removal and return, as announced by the prophet, emphasizes their symbolic importance.

To more effectively impress the people with the message of the Lord, Jeremiah is led to use various illustrations. One day he must buy a linen belt and wear it without washing it (Jer. 13). Then God ordered him to go and hide it in a rock crevice near the Euphrates River. Jeremiah undertakes this harrowing journey without arguing about it. After a long time he must return to the Euphrates and dig it up, only to find that the belt was “ruined ... profitable for nothing” (v. 7).

For the inhabitants of Anathoth and for the entire people, the allegory is obvious: “For as the (belt) clings to the waist of a man, so I have caused the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to cling to me,” says the Lord (v. 11). But their pride, their refusal to listen to the words of the prophets, the obstinacy of their idolatrous heart, could only earn them exile on the shores of the Euphrates.

On another occasion Jeremiah must visit the potter’s house (Jer. 18) and observe his work. “And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.” From this, Jeremiah draws a lesson: If the people turn away from their evil ways and doings, God may repent of His sentence against them. On the other hand, if finally they turn away from him, the announced blessing can be lost. This change of mind on the part of God (the Greek word “metanoia” means repentance or change of mind) does not imply any regret as to His initial decision. Rather it manifests His grace and righteousness in suspending the sentence when he discerns the least sign of repentance in the guilty one. On many occasions, this patience of God is mentioned in Scripture. For example, at the time of the flood, “the long-suffering of God waited” (1 Pet. 3:20); and again: for such an ungodly man as Ahab king of Israel, the Lord exhibited His patience (1 Ki. 21:27-29). Even in the case of “Jezebel” who introduced corruption into the church, God’s patience is displayed: “I gave her time that she should repent” (Rev. 2:21).

Another time Jeremiah is invited to buy a potter's earthen bottle. Then in the sight of the elders of the people and the elders of the priests, the prophet breaks the bottle. Thus God will "break this people and this city as one breaks a potter's vessel which cannot be made whole again" (Jer. 19:11).

Chapter 27 speaks of six yokes which Jeremiah is called upon to send to several kings; and he has to put one upon his own neck. This is a sign of the servitude to which all of them must be reduced by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

However, the prophet's practical illustrations have no more real effect on the people than his preaching did.

3. Messages to the Chief Men

On various occasions, Jeremiah spoke to the leaders of the people..

In chapter 21:1-7 he answers the two emissaries of King Zedekiah who were sent to him with the hope that God would deliver Judah from the king of Babylon through the prophet's intervention. Jeremiah, however, does not allow himself to be impressed by the importance of the messengers. He can only confirm the judgment already announced.

On the other occasion he speaks to King Jehoiakim himself (22:1,18). Without hesitation, he points out the king's pride and hardness, his selfishness, his vain-glory, his lack of concern for the welfare of his people (vv. 13-17).

It is too late to bemoan his predecessors. Good King Josiah was dead (v. 10). Jehoahaz had been captured and would never see his native land again (vv. 10-12). With regard to Jehoiakim himself, he will die violently with none to lament him. Further, "He shall be buried with the burial of a donkey, dragged and cast out beyond the gates of Jerusalem" (vv. 18,19). Despite this frightening prophecy, the king refuses to listen.

Jeremiah next rebukes the shepherds (23:1) who destroyed and scattered the flock, instead of visiting them and caring for them. Ezekiel, the prophet of the captivity, had the same message for the shepherds of Israel (Ezek. 34). They did not strengthen the weak sheep. They did not heal the sick. They did not bind up what was broken. They did not restore those who were driven away. Neither did they seek for that which was lost. They ruled over them with harshness and with rigor (Ezek. 34:4), and the sheep were

“scattered.” While allowing for differences in times and places, is it not true that similar practices have been repeated throughout the Church’s history, even at times within the assemblies? Harshness and rigor have caused scattering. Sick, wounded, and wandering sheep result when proper care is not provided and when only “the fat and the strong” are considered.

Jeremiah next reproached the prophets (23:9,16). Instead of conveying to their hearers the Word of the Lord, “They speak a vision of their own heart.” Instead of standing in the council of God and causing His people to hear His Word (v. 22), they go forth according to their own thoughts. How dangerous is that unfaithfulness which warps or even falsifies the message of God’s Word through bringing in one’s own opinions. “I did not send these prophets, yet they ran; I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied” (v. 21).

Jeremiah speaks also to the priests - those responsible in the sphere of religious activity. He especially warns them concerning “the vessels of the Lord’s house” (27:16). Contrary to the words of the false prophets, these vessels would not yet be brought back from Babylon. Rather, the vessels still left in the temple would eventually be carried away. Such a sad prospect should have brought those responsible for the worship of God to repentance. But they did not care.

More than once the prophet did not shrink back from speaking directly to King Zedekiah. His message no longer resembled the one delivered during the time of the previous kings when repentance would have suspended the execution of judgment. More than one had been exiled; God now commanded the people to submit to discipline. They were not to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, but to accept the yoke, to surrender, and to serve the king of Babylon. Instead of humbling themselves, Zedekiah and the rest of the people persisted in resisting the Lord’s command.

Immediately upon Zedekiah’s coronation, Jeremiah speaks to him (27:12) and exhorts him to bring his neck “under the yoke of the king of Babylon” and to serve him. During the siege of Jerusalem he again warns him of the consequences of disobedience, “You shall not escape from his hand ... your eyes shall see the eyes of the king of Babylon” (Jer. 34:1-7).

Maybe Zedekiah was somewhat impressed by the prophet’s insistence. “When Jeremiah entered the dungeon and the cells, and ... had remained there for many days, then Zedekiah the king sent and ... asked him secretly, “Is there any word from the Lord?” (Jer. 37:15-17). These had been frightful months for Jeremiah, and he could have understandably tempered

his message somewhat to get deliverance. However, remaining faithful to the mission entrusted to him by God, he answers: "You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon."

A short time later Zedekiah orders the prophet to be brought to him at the third entrance of the house of the Lord (38:14). For the last time Jeremiah exhorts the king to "freely go forth to the king of Babylon's princes", and to accept God's discipline. Jeremiah assures Zedekiah that he would not be given over into the hands of the Jews that had deserted to the Chaldeans: "Please, obey the voice of the Lord which I speak to you. So it shall be well with you" (v. 20). The king hesitates a while, but is unable to reach a decision.

In the tenth month of the ninth year of the reign of Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar comes and besieges Jerusalem. Sixteen months later the city is broken up (39:1-2). As the king of Judah and his men of war flee, they are pursued and overtaken by the army of the Chaldeans. Captured, Zedekiah is taken to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar pronounces judgment upon him. "The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah in Riblah before his eyes, and the king of Babylon slaughtered all the nobles of Judah; and he put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him with chains of brass, to carry him to Babylon" (vv. 6-7). Jerusalem is taken; the house of the king and the houses of the people are burned; the walls of the city are broken down; the temple is plundered and destroyed, and the people are taken captive to Babylon (2 Ki. 25:9-11). Overwhelmed with these misfortunes, Jeremiah writes his "Lamentations".

"How lonely sits the city that was full of people ... She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears are on her cheeks ... Judah has gone into captivity ... She dwells among the nations, and finds no rest" (Lam. 1:1-13). God has given full vent to His anger against "the daughter of Zion" (2:1-2). The altar has been cast off. The sanctuary has been rejected. The walls of the palaces have been given into the hand of the enemy. They have shouted loudly in the house of God. The ramparts and the wall have been destroyed. The gates are broken down. The princes have been exiled among the nations. The law is in effect no more, and the prophets find no vision from the Lord. The elders sit upon the ground in silence and have put dust upon their heads. The virgins of Jerusalem hang down their heads to the ground (2:7-10).

The prophet mentions how frightful the siege of Jerusalem had been. Young children were asking for bread, but there was none to give. Those who feasted on delicacies shortly before, were perishing in the streets. Those who were brought up in fine clothing now embrace ash heaps. It was better to be

slain with the sword than to die from hunger. Women in their despair were eating their own children (4:4-10).

Everything is destroyed; all is finished. Everything has sunk into despair. “The joy of our heart has ceased; our dance has turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!” (5:15,16).

When everything has crumbled, what is left? “You, O Lord, remain forever” (5:19). This is the verse that one of our sisters discovered inscribed on a wall among the ruins of a mission in China. Despite the rebellion that was driving the Christians out of the country, the Lord Himself remained. One of our brethren who was looking over the ruins of London after the war found the following words engraved on the lintel of a door that was still standing among the wreckage: “For we know that if our earthly house be destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (2 Cor. 5:1)

“You remain.” Is not Jeremiah’s supreme and unwavering hope placed before us as an example to firmly trust the One who remains and is coming soon – in spite of the evil that surrounds and the judgment that is imminent?

Thinking Things Through

1. What were some of the messages Jeremiah had for the people of Judah?
How might the prophet’s messages be applied to us?
How did the people react toward Jeremiah’s messages?
2. What special messages were aimed at the leaders of Judah?
What special difficulties did the prophet encounter due to his message to this group of people?
3. What were the circumstances surrounding the writing of the book of Lamentations?
What is the Christian hope in the midst of the “lamentable condition of the world”?

CHAPTER 3 – PERSECUTION

During Josiah's lifetime Jeremiah enjoyed a measure of protection. Even if the people did not listen to his preaching, it appears that he was not openly resisted. After Josiah's death, things changed.

1. His Family (Jer. 11:18-19,21; 12:7-11)

At first Jeremiah was not aware of his family's hostility. But then God warns him, "For even your brothers, the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously with you ... Do not believe them, even though they speak smooth words to you" (12:26). Along with the inhabitants of Anathoth, they were seeking the life of the prophet and wanting to put an end to his preaching (11:26). Jeremiah was ignorant of these plots (11:19) until he was informed of them by God.

How painful it is to have to live in a divided family! The Lord Jesus warns his disciples in this respect: "I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes will be those of his own household" (Matt. 10:35,36). How many tensions arise when one member of a family turns to the Lord and the others are opposed: lack of understanding, sometimes overt acts of hostility, and in some countries even persecution. We should be very grateful if the grace has been granted to us to live in a closely-knit family where each member loves the Lord and seeks to serve Him! A beautiful example is offered us by "the house of Stephanas ... the firstfruits of Achaia" who had "devoted themselves to the saints for service" (1 Cor. 16:15). They all belonged to the Lord, and each one desired to serve Him.

Having been unsuccessful in carrying out their plans, Jeremiah's relatives destroy his heritage and his vineyard. He was forced to give up his house and the small plot of land which he had received from his father. A graphic picture is drawn of Jeremiah as with sadness he considers his destroyed vineyard and his portion trodden under foot (12:7-11).ⁱⁱ We may even wonder when Jeremiah speaks of the "beloved of my soul" (12:7) whether the person alluded to is perhaps a betrothed bride, whom he had to forsake because his hostile family had won her over to their side. Whatever

the case, the word of the Lord which came to him a little later was definite: “You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place” (16:1, 2).

In loneliness the prophet goes away, forsaking his heritage and his hopes – yet in spite of everything, standing firm in his purpose to proclaim the word of the Lord.

2. The People

The people, indignant at Jeremiah’s preaching on the occasion of the vessel remodeled by the potter, contrived against the prophet. They decided to “smite him with the tongue”, and to spread false rumours about him. Backbiting and slander would effectively stop his preaching and prevent anyone from listening to any of his words. When David had a similar experience he prayed to God, saying, “Hide me from the secret counsel of the evil- doers ... who have sharpened their tongue like a sword, and have aimed their arrow, a bitter word” (Ps. 64:2-3). The “scourge of the tongue” is mentioned in Job 5:21.

Consider the words of the apostle Peter. Before exhorting the saints to exercise their holy priesthood by drawing near to the Lord and offering spiritual sacrifices, he urges them to lay aside “all evil speaking” (1 Pet. 2:1). How much harm is done among the people of God by spreading rumors, perhaps true in themselves, which disparage and belittle others. Is it done to enhance one’s own image? And what shall we say of the negative criticism which is aimed at the servants of God – and which risks interfering with their ministry and discrediting their message? Even Paul had this sad experience, especially at Corinth and in Galatia. And was not the Lord Himself accused by false witnesses, and by Pharisees who asserted that He was casting out demons by the prince of demons! What a painful experience for servants of God who are attacked in this way; and what serious consequences will face those who “smite with the tongue” when they stand before the Lord to answer for their words.

Jeremiah had stood before God in order to speak for his people in an attempt to avert the wrath of Jehovah from them (18:20). Confronted by slander and criticism, the prophet can only say in his prayer. “Lord, give heed to me, and listen to the voice of those that contend with me” (18:19).

3. Pashur (20:1-3)

On his return from the Valley of Hinnom where he had broken the vessel in the sight of the elders and priests, Jeremiah again stands in the court of the Temple and warns the people of coming judgment. Hearing him prophesy these things, Pashur, a priest and chief officer in the house of God, strikes him and puts him in the stocks at the upper gate of Benjamin. The stocks were instruments of torture. Jeremiah on this occasion has to endure them for the rest of the day and the following night. These were hours of physical and mental sufferings. Their effects on his soul are expressed in chapter 20:10-18.

All through the centuries many believers have been subjected to torture. Stephen was stoned at Jerusalem. Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned at Philippi. There were many martyrs in the first centuries of the church. We also think of the Huguenots and others at the time of the Reformation. Even today many children of God are tormented in various countries. As we read in Hebrews 11:33-38, some are delivered and escape the edge of the sword; others are tortured, undergo trials, are slaughtered, or wander about. The mystery of God allows John the Baptist to perish in prison while Peter is rescued. To Smyrna it is said: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." To Philadelphia the message is: "I also will keep you out of the hour of trial, which is about to come" (Rev. 2:10; 3:10).

It is interesting, however, that the New Testament does not record the violent deaths of the Lord's servants except in the case of Stephen in Acts 7, and only incidentally in the case of James in Acts 12:2. In this way pre-eminence is given to the death of the Lord Jesus, to His sufferings and His being forsaken that He might receive all the attention of our hearts.

4. Priests and Princes (26:7-16,24)

Years have gone by; Josiah is dead; the brief reign of Jehoahaz has come to an end. Jehoiakim has just ascended the throne. Once more Jeremiah prophesies "in the court of The Lord's house." On hearing him the priests, the prophets, and all the people seize him and say, "You will surely die" (v. 8). Attracted by the commotion, the princes of Judah approach the house of the Lord and hear the unhesitating demand of the priests and prophets, "This man deserves to die!"

Given the opportunity to be heard, Jeremiah reminds the princes of how he has followed God's injunction to speak "against this house and against this city." Then he repeats his exhortation, "Amend your ways and your doings, and hearken to the voice of The Lord your God." If they come back to Him, He will certainly repent of the evil that He has pronounced against them. "As for me, here I am, in your hand; do with me as seems good and proper to you. But know for certain that if you put me to death, you will surely bring innocent blood on yourselves" (vv. 14,15).

The princes listen to Jeremiah and declare to the priests, "This man is not worthy to die." Some elders of the land recall Micah's prophecy in the time of Hezekiah, to whom the king had listened with the result that judgment was suspended. Ahilam, the son of Shaphan (the scribe who with Hilkiah had discovered the book of the law) intervenes on Jeremiah's behalf, so that they should not give him into the hand of the people to put him to death. (v. 24). This time the prophet is delivered.

5. Captains and Princes (37:11-21)

A few years later, during a temporary interruption of the siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah takes the opportunity to leave the city in order to try to get some provisions in the land of Benjamin. As he is going through the gate, a captain arrests him, accusing him of deserting to the Chaldeans. In vain Jeremiah protests against the untrue accusation. Irijah brings him to the princes. They become very angry and beat the prophet and put him in prison in "the vaults" where he has to remain "many days." This time no one delivers him.

We do not know how long Jeremiah stayed in the dungeon before King Zedekiah sends for him and secretly asks him if there is "any word from the Lord." The anxious king hopes to hear a word of relief. It is a tense moment as the prophet, having already suffered so much, ponders that Zedekiah has the power to either free him or send him back to the dungeon. Then he answers: "There is."

Again there is a brief silence. We can surmise the emotions mingling in Jeremiah's mind: his compassion for the young king vying with his determination to faithfully declare the Lord's message. Again he speaks, "You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon!"

Zedekiah, however, in answer to Jeremiah's supplication does not send him back to the vaults, but has him committed into the court of the guard; "and they gave him daily a loaf of bread ...until all the bread in the city was spent."

6. Responsible Men – Princes (38:1-6)

In spite of everything, Jeremiah continues to proclaim the word of the Lord. However, he no longer urges them to "Amend your ways, repent and the judgment will be suspended." The time of chastisement has arrived. Already Nebuchadnezzar has besieged the city. Therefore the message from God is to accept the judgment from His hand and surrender to the Chaldeans. Upon hearing Jeremiah's words, certain men whose names have been preserved in the Scriptures (38:1) say to the king, in agreement with the princes, "Please let this man be put to death." In their eyes Jeremiah is a mere traitor – an ally of Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah, who lacks strength of character, delivers him into their hand, realizing that he is powerless before them. These men seize the prophet and cast him into the pit in the court of the guard. "And in the pit there was no water, but mire; and Jeremiah sank in the mire."

In Lamentations the prophet recalls the distress of his soul in this terrible situation: "They that are mine enemies without cause ... have cut off my life in a pit, and cast a stone upon me. Waters streamed over my head; I said, I am cut off" (Lam. 3:52-54). Feeling that he is perishing, he cries to God: "I called on your name, O Lord, from the lowest pit. You have heard my voice. You drew near on the day I called on You, and said, 'do not fear!' O Lord, You have pleaded the case for my soul; You have redeemed my life" (vv. 55-58). In answer to the ardent supplication of His servant, the Lord directs Ebedmelech, an Ethiopian eunuch in the king's house, to draw Jeremiah out of his predicament. This man takes it upon himself to go to Zedekiah to intercede for the prophet, obtaining the authorization to deliver him. The king provides thirty men to assist him. Ebed-melech, with much regard for the prisoner, takes old shreds and rags and asks Jeremiah to put them under his armpits beneath the ropes. "And they drew up Jeremiah with the ropes, and brought him up out of the pit."

Once more God delivers His servant. Before the end of the siege, while he was still shut up in the court of the guard, a special word from God was given to him for Ebed-melech. The Ethiopian will be delivered on the

day when the city will be taken; he will not be given into the hands of the men he fears; he will have his life for a prize, “because you have put your trust in me, says the Lord” (39:15-18). God does not forget to reward the instruments that He uses on behalf of those He sends (Matt. 25:34-45).

Thinking Things Through

1. Describe briefly the persecution which Jeremiah suffered from his own family.

How did he respond?

How should we respond when those nearest to us reject us because of the Lord?

2. List some of the ways Jeremiah suffered at the hand of people, priests, princes, and others.

How do all these sufferings typify the sufferings of Christ?

3. Who were some of those who showed kindness and help to Jeremiah in all his distresses?

Consider some of the people you know and situations you face wherein you might follow their good examples.

CHAPTER 4 – DISCOURAGEMENT

Jeremiah, although timid by nature, has appeared before us with a God-given boldness which sustained him throughout the persecutions. The Spirit of God, however, does not omit in the Word the moments of discouragement through which he passed during his long career. Let us consider some of them as well as the divine answers granted him.

1. Useless Preaching (8:21; 9:2)

Jeremiah was keenly aware of the distress that was to be the portion of his nation: “For the breach of the daughter of my people am I crushed ... that I may weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (8:21; 9:1)

Nevertheless, he knew very well that the cause of the misfortunes about to come down on his fellow-countrymen was their iniquity, their lies, their refusal to listen to God, their malicious criticism, and all of their acts of deceit and wickedness (9:3-6).

What use is further prophesying, further warning, when no one will listen? “Oh that I had in the wilderness a traveller’s lodging-place, that I might leave my people, and go away from them!” (9:2). In other words, I’ve had enough of it all; I’d like to flee to a far away place and have nothing more to do with these people.

David experienced the same feelings when he was being heavily pursued by his enemies: “Oh that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away, and be at rest; behold, I would flee afar off, I would lodge in the wilderness” (Ps. 55:6-7).

In his bewilderment Jeremiah does not receive a direct answer from God; but the psalmist presents to us some of the divine resources that undoubtedly were offered to him. When David was fleeing before Saul to the cave (Ps. 57:1), he cried out “Be merciful to me, O God ... For my soul trusts in you; and in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge until these calamities have passed by.” Now he is not seeking the wings of a dove with which to fly away, but the shadow of the wings of the Most High to take

refuge under. Thus we read at the end of Psalm 55, in verse 22: “Cast your burden on the Lord and He shall sustain you, He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.”

2. In Perplexity (12:1-3)

As we saw in a previous chapter, the first persecutions which the prophet had to suffer were inflicted upon him by his family and the men of his village. His reaction is depicted at the beginning of chapter 12.

Jeremiah is perplexed. The way of the wicked is prospering; those that deal very treacherously are at ease; with their mouths they speak of God, but He is far from their hearts. And yet, He has planted them, they have taken root, they advance, they bring forth fruit (12:1-2). As for the prophet whose heart is known by God, who has followed the Lord faithfully, who has answered His call – his trials now overtake him, and his family hates him. But why?

Asaph had the same experience (Ps. 73): The wicked are prosperous, proud, and arrogant; they are scoffers; they deride God, and yet “They prosper in the world; they heap up riches” (Ps. 73:3-12)! He, Asaph, who has purified his heart, who has washed his hands in innocency, is experiencing daily trials. With painful mental exertion he endeavours to penetrate this mystery of the ways of God: “When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me – until I went into the sanctuary of God.” There the Lord gives an answer to His servant. Asaph now understands the end of the wicked. He experiences the constant presence of the Lord who has held his right hand. Trials have not ceased – “My flesh and my heart fail.” But he has the experiential knowledge that God is the rock of his heart and his portion forever: “There is none upon earth I desire beside you ... but as for me, it is good for me to draw near to God” (vv. 7-28).

For Jeremiah the answer is not so comforting. Instead, it is a challenge. “If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?” (Jer. 12:5). In other words, if relatively minor trials like those caused by your family are sufficient to weary you, what will you do when greater trials, like charging “horses” or the “swelling of the Jordan,” come upon you? We must learn to endure today’s trials in order to be strengthened for those of tomorrow.

3. Jeremiah, the Object of Painful Opposition (15:10-21)

With time, persecutions increased and Jeremiah had to bear the full brunt of their storm. “Woe is me, my mother, that you have borne me a man of strife ... every one... curses me” (15:10). What a burden was this task of constantly prophesying judgment while, the false prophets were predicting peace! It got him only cursing and reproach.

However, he says to the Lord: “Your words were found, and I did eat them, and your words were unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart” (v. 16). The rediscovery of the book of the law had been a very great joy for him; the words of God became his constant food. He had parted company with the mockers, with those who refused God’s Word. He “sat alone.”

What is the good of all that? “Why is my pain perpetual ... It refuses to be healed” (v. 18). Turning toward God he wonders whether or not he has been deceived! He asks, Was I right when I obeyed His call to be a prophet? “Will You surely be to me like an unreliable stream, as waters that fail?” Jeremiah’s complaint contains “precious” elements, especially in his appreciation for the Word of God. However, it also contains some “vile” ones (v. 19), such as the distrust that rises in his heart towards the Lord.

Job had cursed the day of his birth. He had profusely reproached God. He had even accused Him. The Lord revealed Himself to His servant, thus bringing him back. Through trial He gave him a deeper knowledge of divine grace, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5,6). In self-judgment Job finds restoration.

What happens in this regard with Jeremiah? What does the divine Word say to him? “If you return, then I bring you back; you shall stand before me” (v. 19). In other words, Turn away from yourself and in My grace I will bring you back to Me again. “You shall stand before me.” You shall have the portion of the prophet who stands “in the council of the Lord, and has perceived and heard his word” (23:18). Furthermore, “If you take out the precious from the vile, you shall be as my mouth.” Put aside your accusations and doubts; hold fast to the precious, and you will go back to your initial calling: “Behold. I have put my words in your mouth” (1:9). You “sat alone” - fine, you did well. “Let them return to you; but you must not return to them.” Even if you suffer from loneliness, do not associate with these wicked men. The promises of chapter one are repeated almost word for word. “I will

make you to this people a fortified bronze wall; and they will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you for I am with you, to save you and deliver you” (15:20; cf. 1:18-19).

4. Put to Torture (20:7-18)

During the rest of the day and throughout the night Pashur had Jeremiah locked in the stocks. He was positioned at the gate of Benjamin, where everybody could see him subjected to torture and sufferings. The passers-by were able to compete with each other in deriding him. What was his reaction?

Jeremiah reminds God that it was not his desire to be a prophet, but that Jehovah had “enticed” him and had prevailed. What had he benefited from it? Nothing but derision and mockery. “For as oft as I speak, I cry out; I proclaim violence and spoil; for the word of the Lord has become unto me a reproach.” He had said to himself, “I will not make mention of him.” The Word, however, had been in his heart as a burning fire; he became wearied with holding in, and he could not (20:8-9). From every side they were defaming him. His neighbors (the people of Anathoth) were watching for his stumbling, in order to take their revenge on him.

Nevertheless the prophet regains possession of himself. In the midst of so many trials, the Lord is with him (vv. 11-13). The feeling of God’s presence even induces him to sing, to praise, to look forward to the deliverance (v. 13); as also with Paul and Silas in prison much later on.

A renewed outbreak of sufferings, however, combined with Satan’s efforts, brings distress back into his heart. “Cursed be the day wherein I was born ... Wherefore came I forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed in shame?”

This completes what God has wished to retain in His Word about the state of mind of His servant. Other passages inform us that Jeremiah did not forsake his ministry. The frightful night at the upper gate of Benjamin weighed heavily on his soul. The recollection of this time of distress has been kept for us. Is not the perseverance of the prophet a constant example for us to follow?

5. The Accumulation of Sufferings (Lam. 3:1-33)

The first two chapters in the brief book of Jeremiah's Lamentations mostly describe Jerusalem and its destruction. In chapters 4 and 5 he recalls the grief and anguish of the siege and the consequences of Nebuchadnezzar's final victory. At the central point of the book of Lamentations (chapter 3) he relates especially his own trials in language which (as various Psalms) can also apply to the sufferings of Christ.

The prophet does not accuse the people and their chiefs of having inflicted on him all the persecutions he endured. Rather, he receives them from the hand of God, saying: "I am the man that has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath." He recalls the years spent in the darkness of prison (vv. 2,6), the deprivation of freedom (vv. 7,9). He remembers the torture that broke his bones (v. 4). He calls to mind the mockeries to which he was subjected. "I am become a derision to all my people; their song all the day" (v. 14). His life was consumed "far off from peace"; he has "forgotten prosperity" (v. 17); all was affliction, wormwood, and gall. "My soul has them constantly in remembrance, and is humbled in me."

How many moments of distress this faithful man of God had to go through! Certainly his career bears some resemblance to that of the One who would come and be a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," who, more than any other, would be "despised, and ... esteemed ... not."

While Jeremiah remembers all his sufferings, he does not fail to mention the encouragement he received (vv. 21-33). "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" (vv. 21-23). Throughout the centuries these words have sustained the faith of many believers.

It is necessary to learn and in silence to wait for the salvation of God, and also to receive from His hand the discipline allowed. One must even accept loneliness and remain silent because trials come from Him; and because one can rest assured that "if he has caused grief, he will have compassion according to the multitude of his loving-kindnesses."

6. Not Weary

Through all these long and painful years, what is most remarkable is that Jeremiah did not grow weary. Until the end he was faithful to his God, faithful to his prophetic calling, and faithful also to his people despite their rebellion, poverty, and distress.

This perseverance is summed up in a few words: “I have not hurried away from being a shepherd who follows you” (Jer. 17:16).

Judah and her chiefs said, “Where is the word of the Lord? Let it then come!” You have been announcing judgment for so long, Jeremiah. Let it arrive! We still don’t see the fulfillment of your prophecies! These people resemble the scoffers of our own time, of whom Peter speaks: “Where is the promise of His coming? For from the time the fathers fell asleep, all things remain thus from the beginning of the creation” (2 Pet. 3:4). We know, however, that the Lord Jesus will come again and first take His own away and then judge the earth. Jeremiah said, “Neither have I desired the fatal day.” He did not wish, like Jonah, to see the fulfillment of his prophecy in order to appear credible before the people. He rather persevered humbly in his service as shepherd and prophet because he was following the One who was to be greater than he, greater than Jonah – the True Servant who “shall not faint nor be in haste, till he has established justice in the earth” (Isa. 42:4).

Later on Paul would rightly say to those Corinthians who had been causing him so much affliction: “Having this ministry, as we have had mercy shown us, we faint not” (2 Cor. 4:1). Deeply conscious of the grace granted to him to be a servant of the Lord, the apostle was persevering. He further says, “We faint not; but if indeed our outward man is consumed, yet the inward is renewed day by day ... while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen” (vv. 16-18). Daily inner renewal is necessary for us to persevere. Our gaze must not linger over our earthly trials, but be directed towards what is beyond, towards the things that are not seen and are eternal.

The prophet as well as the apostle left us with this testimony of perseverance: through faith the eyes of the believer look steadfastly on the One “who, in view of the joy lying before him ... endured so great contradiction from sinners against himself.” As a result of this contemplation, we will not grow weary and discouraged in our souls (Heb. 12:3).

Thinking Things Through

1. In times of discouragement, Jeremiah often felt that his preaching was useless, and he was perplexed. What resources did he find in the Lord at such times?

In thinking through your own experiences along this line, consider how the Lord has helped you through them.
2. How can we explain the seeming contradictions in some of the passages where Jeremiah expressed his deep grief, and seems to combine praise to God with accusations against God? See, for example Jeremiah 20:7-18.
3. Jeremiah's love and concern for his people who caused him so much grief, sorrow, and persecution is truly remarkable. Consider this beautiful attitude in the light of some New Testament Scriptures concerning our attitude towards others (Rom. 12:10-21; Phil. 1:1-9).

CHAPTER 5 – BARUCH (JER. 36)

The events of this chapter take place in the fourth and fifth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, king of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar's army had already invaded the land. A first deportation including Daniel and his companions had taken place (Dan. 1:1-4). A number of the vessels of the temple had been carried away. The king, however, still lived in Jerusalem, and his reign was to last a few more years.

Jeremiah's prophecies which had been proclaimed for twenty-three years had been ignored. The Lord commands him to write "all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel, against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day I spoke to you from the days of Josiah, even to this day" (Jer. 36:2). Perhaps Judah upon hearing these warnings will give heed to their reading.

So the prophet dictated all the words of the Lord to Baruch his friend, who wrote them down on a scroll. This work evidently took a long time, since the book was not read publicly to the people before the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim (v. 9). One can well visualize the two men in the house where Jeremiah lived. Under the guidance of the Spirit of God, the prophet carefully dictates the words of the Lord while Baruch applies himself to the task of writing on the scroll. All the while the two men are fully aware that they are transmitting the very words of God to those who would read the message.

On account of the seriousness of the prevailing circumstances, a fast before the Lord is proclaimed in the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim's reign. All the people of Judah who come to Jerusalem will be present. Baruch seizes the opportunity and reads the words of Jeremiah "in the house of the Lord, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the scribe, in the upper court, at the entry of the new gate of the house of the Lord, in the ears of all the people" (v. 10). Shaphan, along with Hilkijah, had found the book of the law at the time when repairs were made in the temple. Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, seems to have followed in the steps of his pious father (v. 26). His own son, Micah, hears "out of the book all the words of the Lord" as they are read aloud by Baruch. He is so impressed by them that he goes down into the scribe's chamber where all the princes had gathered, and declares to them all the words that he has heard (v. 13). (In the

same way, young people who are able to attend meetings might have a desire to convey what has been read, or said to ailing or aged persons who are confined to their homes. Such secret service is so useful and greatly appreciated by those to whom it is rendered!) The princes send for Baruch himself, asking him to bring along the roll, so that they might hear from his own mouth the text read to the people.

We may be surprised that this reading of the prophecies which Jeremiah had declared so many times seems to be something entirely new for the princes. Maybe they had seldom heard the prophet, personally. In any case, this incident illustrates the power of the written Word of God. While the Gospel may be preached, it is only the Word of God (“the seed” as the Lord Jesus called it) which is “living and powerful”. It is this Word which confronted the princes of Judah that day.

When they seek assurance of how the scroll was written, Baruch gives them express confirmation: “He pronounced all these words unto me with his mouth, and I wrote them with ink in the book.”

Knowing the king’s instability, the princes advise Jeremiah and Baruch to hide themselves. Then they immediately proceed to the king’s court to report to Jehoiakim the prophet’s word’s, leaving the scroll in the room of Elishama the scribe. Desiring to hear the prophet’s words himself, Jehoiakim has Jehudi bring the scroll. The messenger then reads the prophecy “in the ears of the king, and in the ears of all the princes that stood beside the king.”

“Now the king was sitting in the winterhouse in the ninth month, and with the fire-pan burning before him.” A certain majesty marks the scene. On the face of these men an expression of terror appears. From experience, they know too well the terrible power of the Babylonian king who is about to pounce down upon their land.

Scarcely has Jehudi read three or four columns, when Jehoiakim is seized with passion. With the scribe’s knife he shreds the scroll and throws it into the fire “until all is consumed.” Three men, including Gemariah the son of Shaphan, urge the king not to burn it but he “would not hear them.” On the contrary, he commands some men to arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet; ‘but the Lord hid them.”

Jehoiakim had not listened to Jeremiah when on several occasions he had spoken to him. Now he rejects the inspired Word, written upon the roll, and destroys it. How tragic it will be for those who, after hearing the gospel of grace, voluntarily reject it.“ Of how much worse punishment, think ye,

shall he be judged worthy who has trodden under foot the Son of God, and esteemed the blood of the covenant ... common, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Heb. 10:29).

All through the centuries Satan has tried relentlessly, but in vain, to destroy the Bible. God has seen to it that the Word should be safely preserved up to our own days. Throughout Israel's dispersion since the destruction of Jerusalem, the Scriptures have been preserved, copied again and again, and transmitted. In the early years of Christianity the fierce persecutions against the Christians failed to do away with the copies of the Scriptures. During the centuries faithful copyists transcribed the existing texts with utmost care. At the time of the Reformation the invention of printing allowed mass production of the scriptures which until then had been in the hands of only a few privileged people. A short time later, however, there arose a relentless pursuit of everyone who possessed a Bible. How tenacious the efforts to destroy the Scriptures as well as its readers! Even today vast areas of the world can receive Bibles and New Testaments only in very small quantities at one time.

In spite of all, "the Word of God is not bound." Through the art of printing, through all the means that God uses to spread the Scriptures, the Bible is more widely distributed today than ever. It has been translated in whole or in part into thousands of languages and dialects. Devoted men and women persevere in this task. God uses available technology to spread His Word everywhere and thus enable a constantly increasing number of people to come into contact with it.

Satan uses other expedients in order to discredit the Scripture. He spreads doubts ("Has God really spoken?" - Gen. 3) or promotes the idea that the Bible contains the Word of God, but is not the Word of God, as some theologians state. Others employ human reasoning, supposedly to explain the Bible. Some strike passages out of it, others add to it, and still others warp or pretend to edit it. But God watches over His Word. He brings about the salvation of those that receive it by faith, and it provides food and edification to God's elect. "Every Scripture is divinely inspired, and profitable for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for instruction in righteousness ... Proclaim the Word; be urgent in season and out of season, convict, rebuke, encourage with all long suffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:16; 4:2). At all times, in every place and under every condition the Word is available to us. It operates in the souls of men as the Sword of the Spirit; as a fire and a hammer; as the source of life; as joy and light.

Jeremiah was deeply affected when he learned of the destruction of the roll that had required so much effort to write. Once more his ministry has been rejected. The word of the Lord, however, comes to him, "Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll which Jehoiakim the king of Judah has burned" (v. 28).

Jeremiah and his friend set to work again to duplicate the destroyed scroll "and there were added besides unto them many like words" (v. 32). The Lord Jesus Himself said, "Heaven and the earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away" (Mark 13:31).

Baruch took deeply to heart what he was writing. Oppressed by fear, he could not sleep and grew weary with his sorrow and grief (Jer. 45:3). One day while he is writing, Jeremiah interrupts his dictation and tells his friend that the Lord, the God of Israel, has a special message for him; everything will be overthrown in the entire land; evil will come upon all flesh, "But I will give your life to you as a prize in all places, wherever you go" (v. 5). Thus Baruch obtained the assurance that his life would be spared. On the basis of this promise, he could take to heart the exhortation given him, "And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them."

We, too, know that frightful judgments will come upon this world. However, we live in the hope that before they break loose, the Lord will return to take away His own. This is an even greater consolation than the one given to Baruch.

Thinking Things Through

1. What lessons for your own life can you learn from the close relationship between Jeremiah and Baruch as friends and co-laborers?
2. Imagine Baruch's feelings when the king destroyed in a few seconds the scroll which he had diligently worked on for many days and months. How do the king's actions illustrate the efforts of Satan throughout the centuries to destroy the Word of God?
3. Notice the little word to a discouraged Baruch, "Do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them." Compare with the Lord's words about discipleship in Luke 9:23-26.

CHAPTER 6 – THE CHOICE

At the end of the history of the prophet's activities, two choices present themselves – one for Jeremiah, the other for the people. Jeremiah can go to Babylon or remain in the land. The remnant of the people left in Judah by Nebuchadnezzar may stay there or go down to Egypt.

1. Jeremiah's Choice (39:10-14; 40:1-6)

After a frightful siege of eighteen months, Zedekiah flees from Jerusalem. The Chaldean army pursues him and overtakes him and his companions in the plains of Jericho. At Riblah, in Nebuchadnezzar's presence, Zedekiah's sons are slaughtered before his eyes. All the nobles of Judah are put to death. Zedekiah's eyes are put out; he is bound with chains of brass and carried to Babylon. "And the Chaldeans burned the king's house and the houses of the people with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem" (v. 8). The rest of Judah, including those that had deserted to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, are carried away captive to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar had given special orders as to Jeremiah: "Keep an eye upon him and do him no harm; but do unto him even as he shall say unto you." The captain of the body-guard takes him out of the court of the guard. Yet, through an unaccountable error, he is bound with chains and found among the captives being transported to Babylon.

The captain of the body-guard discovers him and delivers him from his chains. He invites him to go along to Babylon, where he would keep his eye upon him, and adds, "But if it seems wrong for you to come with me to Babylon, remain here. See, all the land is before you; wherever it seems good and convenient for you to go, go there" (40:4).

Jeremiah is now reaching the end of his public ministry. He is probably at least sixty years old. Two choices are placed before him. He may go to Babylon where he will be able to enjoy the king's favors; where he will find his friends Daniel, Ezekiel, and other captives carried away on a previous occasion; and where he will be able to spend the rest of his life in relative tranquillity. On the other hand, he may remain with the poor of the land in Palestine and exercise a ministry among them. It will probably not

find a better acceptance than his previous prophesying, but will nevertheless provide, on God's part, a last encouragement for these desolate remains of Israel.

The Word of God speaks of several choices. Abraham, satisfied with the territory that Lot would not choose, invites his nephew to make his choice first. Instead of leaving the first choice to his uncle, Lot lifts up his eyes and looks at the plain of Sodom. We know the rest of his life. As for Moses, the Epistle to the Hebrews confirms that through faith he chose "rather to suffer affliction along with the people of God than to have the temporary pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25). Solomon does not ask for glory and riches, but for the wisdom necessary to carry out in the interests of the people the royal responsibilities that God had entrusted to him (2 Chron. 1:7-12). Mary "has chosen the good part, that which shall not be taken from her," the place at the feet of Jesus.

In the life of every Christian many choices arise, some more important than others. Nebuzaradan says to Jeremiah: "See all the land is before you; wherever it seems good and convenient for you to go, go there." Doesn't a young man face virtually the same situation when he is about to choose a career or a profession? At the end of his high school or college years various alternatives are offered to him. Which is the path that the Lord wants for him? His parents may advise him; an experienced brother may express his opinion; yet it remains the young believer's responsibility to decide with the help of the Lord how he will spend the main part of his life.

Still more important is the choice of a wife. How necessary to continually pray for the Lord's guidance – that He might lead each of us to that special one of whom He can say, "I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Gen. 2:18).

Finally, as to a place of fellowship, many believers are faced with the problem of choosing among several. Should they remain where they have been brought up? What a privilege if they become convinced that the place where they already meet is the place where the Lord Jesus gathers His redeemed around Himself! Other believers, however, are called upon to discern where the Lord wants to lead them, so that they might be found in His presence with His own.

On these three choices hang "the issues of life" – choices that are not made in the head, but in the heart – in true dependence on the Lord as our faithful Friend.

Jeremiah remains silent; “he had not yet given an answer.” Nebuzaradan no doubt expects him to gratefully welcome the attractive offer to settle in Babylon. From the silence of the prophet he concludes that the proposal is not accepted and so encourages Jeremiah to go to Gedaliah, or “wherever it seems good and convenient for you to go” (40:5). He gives him provisions and a gift, and sends him away. Jeremiah comes to Gedaliah and abides “with him among the people that remained in the land.” He prefers to stay with the poor of the people of God in their destitution rather than to enjoy the favors of the king of Babylon. Perhaps there is not much to attract one in one’s own meeting – not many spiritual gifts, not an abundance of warm fellowship. If however, the Lord through His presence fulfills His promise to be in the midst of two or three gathered unto His name, is it not the place where one should stay, and (in dependence upon Him) endeavor to contribute some spiritual blessing?

2. The Choice of the People

Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, had been appointed governor over the cities of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar. For a few months this grandson of the scribe is a good governor. Those Jews who had fled to the surrounding countries return with full confidence to the land of Judah and gather wine and summer fruits in great abundance (Jer. 40:12)

Jealousy, however, will spoil everything. A certain man of royal blood named Ishmael evidently thought that he should have been appointed governor. And so he kills Gedaliah along with all the Jews with him and the Chaldean men of war that had been left there by the king of Babylon. He then takes the survivors with him intending to go to the land of Ammon (41:10). However, Johanan and the captains of the forces that were with him free the captives from Ishmael, who flees to Baalis the king of the children of Ammon. Johanan and those whom he has delivered seek refuge for a time in the inn of Chimham at Bethlehem, waiting for the opportunity to flee secretly into Egypt, for fear of the Chaldeans.

We do not know how Jeremiah happens to be in that place. But Johanan and those with him ask him to pray for them in order that “The Lord thy God may show us the way wherein we should walk, and the thing that we should do.” Now these men had already decided in the depths of their hearts to go down to Egypt. Their whole hope was that Jeremiah would confirm their secret purpose.

The prophet promises that he would pray, “and it shall come to pass that whatsoever things the Lord shall answer you, I will declare it unto you” (42:4). These men then promise to “hearken to the voice of the Lord,” whatever the answer will be.

To choose first and then to pray – is this not a trap set by Satan before many a child of God? This is especially so when one’s heart is already committed to marry a person outside the will of God. Perhaps the person is unconverted or walking in a path where true Christian fellowship is not possible. Or perhaps this person will entice the believing partner into a worldly lifestyle. Whatever the reason, the person does not answer to the will of God for His own.

Advice is sought from one’s parents or possibly from an experienced brother: the situation is explained and prayer is requested. They raise again the question of the will of God and point to the dangers involved in such a marriage. However, the heart has already decided and will not turn back. Similar situations arise in matters other than marriage. How important to acquire the habit of seeking the Lord before making decisions in one’s heart. Then it will be natural to turn first to our well-known Friend in the decisive hours of life.

Ten days elapse before the answer comes to Jeremiah (42:7). This allows time to reflect on the hypocrisy of asking prayer for direction. Then he gives them God’s definite answer: “If you will still abide in this land, then will I build you ... and I will plant you ... Be not afraid of the king of Babylon ... for I will be with you to save you ... and I will grant mercy to you.” If you go into Egypt, where you think you will see neither war nor famine, it is precisely there that they will follow hard after you. “The Lord has said concerning you, the remnant of Judah, ‘Go ye not into Egypt.’” The advice is clear. But since Johanan and his companions had already reached their decision, they quickly respond, “You speak falsely! The Lord our God has not sent you to say, ‘Do not go to Egypt to sojourn there’” (43:2).

Deeds follow these words. Johanan gathers all those left in the land – “men, women, and children, and the king’s daughters. and every person that Nebuzar-adan ... had left with Gedaliah ... and they came into the land of Egypt: for they hearkened not unto the voice of the Lord.

Throughout his life Jeremiah has seen his prophecies rejected and his warnings despised. Now it has happened again. Nevertheless, he follows the people into Egypt and even there warns them by the Word of the Lord (43:8-13). But all is in vain. They reply to him, “As for the word that you have

spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you, but we will certainly do whatever has gone out of our own mouth” (44:16,17).

The prophet, rejected and despised like his Master will be, apparently finishes his days in that land of exile. No details are given in the Word. His end is as sad as his lonely life had been. Later, John the Baptist will finish his course in a similar way – put into prison and then beheaded.

Such servants have been eminently faithful, even unto death, They had their moments of weakness, but in the day of rewards their crown will be glorious. To the end, they have answered the call which God addressed to them in their youth.

Jerusalem has been destroyed, its walls torn down, the temple set on fire, the people slaughtered or transported into exile; the history of Israel seems to finish in blood and tears.

But seventy years later a remnant will come back and rebuild the temple and the wall. Their descendants will sink deeply into legalism and traditionalism. When the promised Messiah comes among them, He is rejected. Once more Jerusalem is destroyed and the people scattered throughout the world. In our days we see how their “dry bones” are beginning to move and come together. Albeit the breath of the Lord will not come upon them until they acknowledge their Messiah (Ezek. 37).

However, this “people terrible from their beginning and hitherto; a nation of continued waiting and of treading down, whose land the rivers have spoiled,” has continued to exist in an extraordinary way down through the centuries. The branches cut out of the olive tree will be “grafted in” again (Rom. 11:23) “in order that they also may be objects of mercy” (v. 31).

Above man’s acts of disobedience, rebellion and ingratitude; above his wretchedness and accumulated ruin, there abides the supreme resource enshrined at the end of the book of Lamentations. “YOU, O LORD, REMAIN FOREVER” (Lam. 5:19; Heb. 1:11).

Thinking Things Through

1. Consider some of the factors which would cause Jeremiah to remain with the poor of the land after the rest had been carried away captive to Babylon. Thinking of an important choice you have made

recently, what were the underlying motives which caused you to decide as you did?

2. Jeremiah's choice did not make life easier for him, nor give him ease and pleasure in his declining years. How did the wrong choices made by others adversely affect him?

To what extent are we affected by the decisions of others such as family, friends, assembly, etc.?

3. Thinking back over this study in the life of Jeremiah, what is the most important lesson for your own life that you have learned from it?

Notes

ⁱ The book that bears this title is primarily concerned with the destruction of Jerusalem and the persecutions that Jeremiah himself suffered.

ⁱⁱ These verses, like many others also, have a prophetic bearing on God's judgment with respect to His people and His heritage.