

## Chapter 38 Jeremiah 1-6

### The Call of Jeremiah

*“See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”*

Jeremiah 1:10

Jeremiah did not live an easy life, but he lived an intensely meaningful life. If we are tired of the mundane, ho-hum religious life, we could pick no better guide to lead us out of the doldrums than Jeremiah. As he grew older, his life did not shrink, it expanded. Instead of becoming feeble and frail, self-absorbed and petty, he continued to be as God promised, like a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall (1:18). Jerusalem’s kings capitulated, her people gave in to every form of evil, and her prophets deceived, but Jeremiah persisted in living and proclaiming the Word of the Lord.

Of all the prophets, Jeremiah’s life illustrated the message he communicated. He incarnated the truth he was called of God to deliver. He lived better than he knew. Long before the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, Jeremiah embodied the Gethsemane mind-set, took up his cross and lived in the hope of the resurrection. Isaiah prophesied that the suffering Servant would be led “like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7) and John the Baptist proclaimed boldly, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” but it was Jeremiah who felt like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter (11:19). The complexities and tensions that the prophet Jeremiah experienced are not unlike the pressures and trials facing today’s followers of Christ. If you are fed up with Christianity without Christ, tired of P.R. pastors, overwhelmed with the challenges of living for Christ in a secular society and confused by the array of popular spiritualities, let Jeremiah be your Spirit-inspired guide.

Everyone seems to find the book of Jeremiah confusing, but a few pointers may make it easier. The fact that the book is not laid out like the alphabet drives linear thinkers to distraction. We like things neatly laid out in sequential order, but the book does not go from A-Z. It is more like a collage of powerful images meant to impress the reader with the word of the Lord from every angle. Detailing *when* Jeremiah said what he did is not nearly as important as what he said and where he said it. In one sense the political chronology is incidental to Jeremiah, but the substance of what Jeremiah communicated is absolutely vital. The book of Jeremiah may be an historian’s nightmare, but it is a communicator’s masterpiece. The message rules. Biting critiques that spiral into tornadoes of truth, judgment pronouncements that fall like hammer blows, soul-searching confessions and tear-driven lamentations, all add up to a powerful message. One really never finishes Jeremiah, nor was one meant to. The message doesn’t end when Judah is forced into exile or when King Zedekiah dies, because the force of the prophecy was meant to be enduring until Christ comes again. The history that mattered to Jeremiah was Salvation History. He was fully aware that kings come and go and empires rise and fall, but it was the Word of the Lord that endured forever. That was what impressed him and he was preaching for the souls of the people.

More than with any other prophet, Jeremiah revealed his heart and soul. The human side of working out the divine calling is on every page. It is evident in the on-going dialogue between the Lord and Jeremiah. Jeremiah was not afraid to express his feelings and confront his fears. He lashed out in hot anger against his enemies and complained bitterly to the Lord. He disclosed the plots and betrayals, slander and ridicule that were directed against him, because he delivered an unpopular message. From his calling in 627 BC, during the reign of Josiah, to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, Jeremiah never stopped proclaiming the word of the Lord, even though it was met with constant opposition. Like Job, Jeremiah cursed the day of his birth, but in the same breath claimed that the Lord was with him like a mighty warrior and that all his persecutors would fail and be thoroughly disgraced (20:11-18). In the eyes of the world, Jeremiah was a failure, but in the eyes of God, he was the prophet who came closest to revealing his one and only son's path to the Cross.

### **The Call**

Jeremiah was the son of a priest named Hilkiah from Anathoth, a small town three miles east of Jerusalem. The name "Hilkiah," like the name "Jeremiah," was a common name in those days, which explains why most scholars conclude that Jeremiah's father was not Hilkiah the high priest in Jerusalem who discovered the Book of the Law (2 Kings 22:8). Names meant something back then, but not everyone lived up to their name. Josiah (639-609 B.C.) meant "God heals." Jehoiakim (609-597 BC) meant "the Lord raises up" and Zedekiah (597-587 BC) meant "the Lord is righteous." There was a double meaning associated with Jeremiah's name. It could mean "the Lord exalts" or it could mean "the Lord hurls." Forty years of prophetic ministry proved that no one was better suited for his name than Jeremiah.

We are all shaped to some degree by our time and place, but these factors may not be the most important influences upon us. Hopefully they are not. For Jeremiah, life was defined, not by culture and circumstances, but by the word of the Lord. This is the singular truth that constantly impresses us about Jeremiah. "The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah..." and it never stopped coming to him (1:2). "The word of the Lord came to me," was the self-perceived truth that defined him personally, set his agenda publicly, and determined the entire course of his life. Jeremiah shows us what it means to be shaped, guided, nurtured, transformed, and empowered by the Word of God. His personal story was part of God's great Salvation History story. The life issues addressed in the first chapter are the issues that we all struggle with: self-understanding, personal significance, feelings of inadequacy, meaning and purpose, disruptive times, life-threatening circumstances and the courage to persevere. For Jeremiah, it was the word of the Lord, that helped him deal with each one of these issues, not just for the moment but for his entire life.

When the word of the Lord defines who we are and what we do, we can't help but take notice of what the Lord is doing to us, for us, in us and around us. In his dialogue with the Lord, Jeremiah repeatedly heard what God was doing: "I formed you...I knew you...I set you apart...I appointed you ...You must go to everyone I send you and say whatever I command you...I am with you and will rescue you...I have put my words in your mouth....I appoint you over nations and kingdoms

...I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall...I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord. One thing is for sure, Jeremiah was not a self-made person. His identity, purpose, significance and calling came from the Lord. All too often, we think of God as the object and ourselves as the subject. We suppose God is the passive object of our inquiry and debate, and the quiet recipient of our apathy or adoration or anger. But as Jeremiah knew so well, it is really the other way around. God's first-person action defined him. "Before Jeremiah knew God, God knew Jeremiah: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.' This turns everything we ever thought about God around" (Peterson, 37). The ego-centric approach is really laughable when you think about it. Who are we to sit in judgment on God and debate whether God is an illusion or a myth or a figment of our imagination? It is the myth of human self-sufficiency that ought to be exposed. Our significance lies in God's action, not in our achievement, and only when this is grasped in the depth of our souls does our action become meaningful.

*The word of the Lord came to me, saying,*  
"Before **I formed you** in the womb  
**I knew you,**  
before you were born **I set you** apart;  
**I appointed you** as a prophet to the nations."

Jeremiah's life did not begin with Jeremiah. It began with God, the God who created him, commended him, consecrated and commissioned him. And all of this happened long before he was aware of himself, realized his need, or longed for significance. Without diminishing the uniqueness of this truth for Jeremiah, what was said of Jeremiah is true for all of us. "In the beginning God..." works not only for the universe, but for each one of us personally (Gen 1:1). We were all meant to hear the word of the Lord saying to us, "I created you, I understand you, and I alone can save you and give you significance." This is what makes Jeremiah especially important for those who follow the Lord Jesus. "God's call to Jeremiah to be a prophet parallels his call to us to be a person" (Peterson, Run with the Horses, 50).

King David's prayer is true for all people, because all people are created in God's image:  
"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made...Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" (Ps 139:13-14, 16).

The value of human life is not found in the will of parents or in self-achievement, but in the will of God. Human worth is not a matter of human potential but of divine principle. If the value of life is determined by what we make of it then existence precedes essence, but if the value of human life is determined by the will and word of God then essence precedes existence. Life is not a matter of what we achieve but of what we receive from God. This is why abortion is wrong and the plight of starving children everywhere is tragic. This is why the human embryo cannot be treated as experimental tissue and this is why human life is guarded with capital punishment. The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah comes to us and reminds us that we are created in God's

image; God is not created in our image.

We can identify with Jeremiah because he shows us what it is to be a person created, known, set apart and called by the Sovereign Lord. We can learn from his example because he shows us how to live through difficult times. “In looking for a companion who has lived through catastrophic disruption and survived with grace, biblical people more often than not come upon Jeremiah and receive him as a true, honest, and God-revealing companion for the worst of times” (Peterson, *The Message*, 1342).

Many believers who identify with Jeremiah in terms of being “formed”, “known” and “set apart” consider the fourth divine action (“I appointed you as a prophet to the nations”) as strictly applied to Jeremiah, with the possible exception of ordained ministers who proclaim the Word or cross-cultural missionaries who deliver the gospel to the nations. But this fourth description of the person of God is as relevant as the first three attributes to all those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

The day that Moses longed for and the prophet Joel anticipated has arrived in Christ. There was an incident in the wilderness that provoked a particularly revealing comment from Moses. When the Spirit of God came upon the seventy elders who had been appointed to help Moses lead, they prophesied. But two elders, Eldad and Medad, who stayed back in the camp also prophesied. This greatly disturbed Joshua who saw the incident as a threat to the chain of command. He excitedly appealed to his superior saying, “Moses, my lord, stop them!” But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:28-29; Campbell Morgan, 20). Centuries later, Joel prophesied what would happen on the Day of the Lord. Thus says the Lord, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions....And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved...” (Joel 2:28,32). This is the prophecy that the apostle Peter declared to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they began to speak in other tongues (Acts 2). And this is the truth that lies behind the great commission that Jesus gave after his resurrection and before his ascension to all believers: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). This opens up the fullness of Jeremiah’s example to us. He is our companion, guide and mentor in being the person that God calls us to be and in proclaiming the word of the Lord entrusted to us. Furthermore, Jeremiah shows us that being a person and being a prophet are really one in the same, because we are not called to merely say something, we are called to live out the message in the fullness of life.

What then is the first lesson that Jeremiah teaches us? What was his first reaction to the call of God? What would you have said if you were Jeremiah in response to being God-created, God-known, God-consecrated and God-commissioned? *What do you say?* Because you were meant to be more like Jeremiah than you ever imagined. Jeremiah opened his mouth and said, “Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.” The first thing out of his mouth

is an excuse, not a rebellious, obstinate excuse, but a “sorry-I’m-inadequate” excuse. It was “the cry of weakness, not of unwillingness” (Morgan, 23). “I am only a boy,” was his excuse. He used his age, his inexperience, his inadequacy, as an excuse. What’s yours? “I am only a housewife.” “I am only a high school student.” “I am only a business person.” I wonder if the prophet Jeremiah came to mind when the apostle Paul challenged Timothy, saying, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). Like Jeremiah, we are tempted to allow our self-definition to shape and control our lives. We have to be coached and challenged out of our depreciating self-talk by the word of the Lord. We have to stop saying, “I am only...” and start realizing what God has done, is doing and will do in us and for us.

The Lord’s response to Jeremiah’s fear of inadequacy goes beyond instructing him and redirects us as well. What follows is a case study in spiritual direction, a solid example of divine therapy designed to remove the emotional and spiritual obstacles that get in the way of obeying God’s call. It is essential counsel that is worth remembering and applying often, because we have a natural bent to hide behind excuses.

The Lord’s counsel starts out simple and direct, “But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ There is no mystery in being told to stop. It is as clear as a bright red, hexagonal traffic sign. Out of necessity the negative inner monologue must cease and be replaced by the word of the Lord. God’s *no*, “Do not say...” was followed immediately by God’s *yes*. Jeremiah was faced with God’s absolute imperative, “You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you” (1:7). This is in line with how Paul must have felt, when he said, “...I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16). Jeremiah’s “I am only a child”—excuse was surrounded by the Lord’s absolute assurance, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you” (1:8).

Following the prohibition, commissioning and promise of protection, the Lord reached out his hand and touched Jeremiah’s mouth and said to him, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:9-10). The touch of God on his mouth stressed the personal nature of Jeremiah’s calling. He acquired the message through an intimate act that symbolized purification (Isa 6:7). This “hands-on” dedication emphasized the de-constructive and constructive nature of God’s message through Jeremiah. His work was tied exclusively to the word of the Lord. It involved a painful “no” to ungodliness and a powerful “yes” to the will of God (Titus 2:12). It was far more important for Jeremiah to be faithful and submissive to the word of the Lord than to be clever and inventive with his opinions. His work was not a medium for self-expression, but a calling for divine revelation. His mission belonged to God. It was imperative that he identify himself with God’s purpose.

The Lord drew Jeremiah into his calling through a simple rebuke, a compelling purpose, positive assurance, and the gift of an unambiguous message. Then, as if that were not enough, the Lord caused Jeremiah to experience two visions. The vision of the blossoming almond tree, which was the first tree to bud in spring, was a sign of the immediate fulfillment of God’s word. The second

vision, that of the boiling pot tilting away from the north and pouring out disaster, signified the judgment of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. The visions enhance the vividness of Jeremiah's calling by igniting his praying imagination.

Jeremiah's orientation to God's work was emotionally and intellectually complete and his ordination to God's message was physically and spiritually compelling. Now all that was left to do was to finalize Jeremiah's commissioning with a summary charge, "Get yourself ready!"; a strong warning, "Do not be terrified by them or I will terrify you before them;" and a categorical promise, "I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land...for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord" (1:17-19).

It is important that we distinguish between a weakness that begs for pity and a weakness that prays for strength. Weakness can foster a false dependency on others or a true dependency on God. Although it may seem harsh to say, it needs to be said that some people cling to their weakness as their own personal claim to significance, a merit badge inviting sympathy. It provides them with a convenient excuse for remaining as they were instead of a compelling reason for becoming what God calls them to be. A good church not only attracts people who are weak, broken, confused, and hurt, but offers Christ to heal their wounds, restore their souls and lead them in paths of righteousness. The word of the Lord called Jeremiah out of a narrow life of his own making. A life that would have been mired in self-pity, self-reliance, feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. And the word of the Lord called him into a great life, a bold life, filled with God's purpose and meaning. Jeremiah shows us what it means to take up our cross and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The Message**

Like the movie previews we see in the theaters, this entire section (2:1-6:30) is made up of clips from various messages that Jeremiah delivered over decades of prophetic ministry. While the timing of the messages may range from Josiah's rule (627) to the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar's army (597), the place where these messages were delivered is firmly established in Jerusalem. We are reminded throughout the book that Jeremiah's calling was focused: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem" (2:1). In this section alone, Jerusalem is referred to fourteen times. Like Jesus who "resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51), Jeremiah's ministry was centered in Jerusalem.

By the time we get to Jeremiah, Jerusalem has become ground zero. In the days of Elijah and Elisha in the ninth century, and Hosea, Amos, and Jonah in the eighth century, the focus was on apostasy in the northern kingdom (Israel). Isaiah and Micah, contemporaries of Amos, focused on the southern kingdom (Judah), but it was left to Jeremiah in the seventh century to bring the message home to Jerusalem in the decades leading up to the exile. For forty years Jeremiah was stationed in a single spiritual war zone. He walked the same streets, saw the same people, and delivered the same message. Jeremiah lived an incredibly focused life. He was not only consecrated (1:5), his ministry focus was concentrated! It is notable that a ministry confined to a few square miles should have such a lasting and far reaching impact.

The message, like the call, was radically God-centered. Jeremiah began with a lament, but it was not his own, it was the Lord's lament charged with emotive metaphors and a stinging indictment. God, the jilted lover, the abandoned husband, was simply forgotten, in spite of the fact that at the outset Israel was a devoted bride and a recipient of God's Exodus power and Promised Land blessings. The prophets Hosea and Isaiah had used this marriage imagery to capture the Lord's love for his people (Isa 54:4-10; Hosea 1-2) and the apostle Paul used it to describe Christ's love for the church (Eph 4:25). Throughout Salvation History the Lord has used the intimacy of marriage to illustrate the personal relationship and communion God offers us in Christ. The apostle John used "the wedding supper of the Lamb" to unite love and redemption in a personal relationship with the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Rev 19:7-9).

These two loves, marital love and divine love, romantic love and redemptive love, are meant to support and illuminate each other. The lesser love, the love between husband and wife, is meant to help us grasp more completely the personal intimacy and earnestness of God's love for us. The greater love, God's sacrificial, saving love, is meant to be the source, strength and standard for human love. The power and intensity of the oneness experienced between a man and a woman points to the greater mystery of our oneness with God in Christ (Soulcraft, 88).

The demise of Israel's devotion to God began more as a matter of default and neglect than outright denial and rebellion. They simply stopped inquiring of the Lord. "They did not ask, 'Where is the Lord, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness...?' ... "The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?' The Lord was like the innocent party in a tragic marriage to a spouse who flaunted, first her indifference and then her infidelity. Israel's priests had become religious professionals instead of worship leaders, her teachers had become "scholars who knew everything but the Lord," her rulers ignored the rules, and her prophets equated Yahweh and Baal. (Kidner, 31).

It was wrong for pagan people to go after idols but a double tragedy for the professing people of God to exchange the glory of God for worthless idols (2:11; see Rom 1:23). It was bad enough for the northern kingdom of Israel to practice spiritual infidelity, but a double tragedy for Judah to ignore Israel's devastation and turn away from Yahweh (2:14-15; 3:6-11). The sobering message for those who profess faith in Christ today is that we, like Judah, may drift away from God's good news through complacency and indifference and turn to the popular idols of our day, self-worship, success, and sex. This is why the author of Hebrews said, "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (Heb 2:1). This is why he contemplated the unthinkable: What would happen to believers who had tasted of the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, and tasted the goodness of the word of God, if they fell away? (Heb 6:4-6).

Jeremiah made the case against these professing believers, who were oblivious to their apostasy and yet serious about their religion, by using their own words to convict them. He had no shortage of evidence. He quoted their refusal to serve the Lord, "I will not serve you!" (2:20), and then gave verbatim their insistence on running after foreign gods, "It's no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them" (2:25). He quoted their devotional words to inanimate objects,

“You are my father,” and “You gave me birth” (2:27) and then cited their empty talk about Yahweh, “He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine” (5:12). He recalled their prayers when they got into trouble, “Come and save us!” (2:27) and reminded them of their arrogance when they were trouble-free, “We are free to roam; we will come to you no more” (2:31). Their religious rhetoric could sound very pious, such as “My Father, my friend from my youth, will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever?”, but then their actions were just as evil as ever (3:4-5). They liked saying, “As surely as the Lord lives,” to cover up their lies (5:2).

Jeremiah made the case against these professing believers with rapid-fire images that visualized their zeal for spiritual apostasy. He likened their chasing after foreign gods to a donkey in heat or a roadside prostitute waiting to be picked up or an unfaithful wife (2:23; 3:2,20). He linked spiritual apostasy and sexual adultery together in such a way that disobedience in one area led inevitably to disobedience in the other area. From Jeremiah’s perspective, idolatry and infidelity were inseparable. Failure to be obedient sexually led to grave spiritual consequences and vice versa. Jeremiah’s tragic picture of Judah’s home life included rebellious children, perverted sexuality and cheating spouses. His images speak volumes, “They are well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for another man’s wife” (5:8). But the people are as oblivious to this tragedy as an old prostitute is to love (4:30). For Jeremiah, sexual immorality captured in a particularly poignant way the spiritual faithlessness of Judah. What should have been a beautiful marriage between God and his people was now nothing more than a sordid, scandalous situation. But there was more to false spirituality than illicit sexuality and idolatry. Sexual promiscuity and economic oppression were linked not only in the mind of the prophet but in reality. “How skilled you are at pursuing [sex]! Even the worst of women can learn from your ways. On your clothes men find the lifeblood of the innocent poor, though you did not catch them breaking in” (2:33-34). Jeremiah likened the wicked to bird catchers, snatching people up and trapping them for their evil purposes. They live in houses full of deceit. They are healthy and sleek and their evil actions know no limit. “They do not plead the case of the fatherless *to win it*, they do not defend the rights of the poor” (5:28). This accusation leaves room for the wicked to appear to be on the side of the poor and orphaned when in fact they are not.

There was only one conclusion to be drawn from all this evidence. “Should I not punish them for this?” declares the Lord. ‘Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this? A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way. But what will you do in the end?’ (5:29-31). To allow evil to go unchecked is evil itself. The evidence demanded a verdict that was both necessary and painful.

Jeremiah was tasked with not only making the case against his people, but describing the judgment to follow. “Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say: ‘Sound the trumpet throughout the land! Cry aloud and say...Flee for safety without delay! For I am bringing disaster from the north, even terrible destruction’”(4:5-6). This was difficult for Jeremiah to do, because the people were totally unsuspecting of this message of judgment, in spite of the work of Habakkuk and Zephaniah. Jeremiah cried out, “Ah, Sovereign Lord, how completely you have

deceived this people and Jerusalem by saying, ‘You will have peace,’ when the sword is at our throats” (4:10-12). Furthermore they had no shame. “Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?” the Lord asks rhetorically. “No, they have no shame at all,” he answers, “they do not even know how to blush” (6:15). They were oblivious to the consequences of their evil actions and their complacency was reinforced by complicity of the leaders who minimized their sin. “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious,” the Lord complained. “‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace” (6:14). This made Jeremiah’s ministry all the more necessary. He must not only pronounce the Lord’s judgment against Jerusalem, but he must defend the justice of this punishment. Therefore he reminded them, “Your own conduct and actions have brought this upon you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the heart!” (4:18).

Against the people’s complacency and the priests’ complicity, Jeremiah was called to pronounce the Lord’s comprehensive and catastrophic judgments against Judah (4:13-17, 23-29; 5:15-17; 6:1-9, 21-26). Jeremiah saw this judgment as so cataclysmic that creation reverted to its primeval state of chaos, “I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; at the heavens, and their light was gone. I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying. I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away” (4:23-25). It would be an understatement to say that this was difficult for Jeremiah to prophesy this judgment. It was in fact a terrible burden that took a heavy toll on Jeremiah. It belies the myth that obedience to the will of God comes without suffering and grief. Jeremiah’s anguish over delivering this message against his people and the Lord’s anguish over having to punish his people appear to merge, so that at times it is difficult to know whether it is the Lord or Jeremiah speaking.

“Oh, my anguish, my anguish!  
I writhe in pain.  
Oh, the agony of my heart!  
My heart pounds within me,  
I cannot keep silent.  
For I have heard the sound of the trumpet;  
I have heard the battle cry.  
Disaster follows disaster;  
the whole land lies in ruins.

In an instant my tents are destroyed,  
my shelter in a moment.  
How long must I see the battle standard  
and hear the sound of the trumpet?  
My people are fools;  
they do not know me.  
They are senseless children;  
they have no understanding.  
They are skilled in doing evil;  
they know not how to do good.”  
(4:19-22; see 6:10-11)

Jeremiah’s message would be far less convicting if it could be limited to seventh century BC Judah, but the way in which the Lord Jesus drew from Jeremiah’s teaching makes this restriction impossible. Jeremiah’s critique reaches into our own time and challenges the church’s propensity to forsake “the spring of living water” for “broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jer 2:13). Like he did to the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus offers us “living water,” but we are tempted to dig our own wells that cannot hold water (Jn 4:10; see Rev 21:6). Judah’s refusal to live under the yoke of obedience and service to God causes us to think of Jesus’ invitation to his

disciples, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Jer 2:20; 5:5; Mt 11:29-30). Jeremiah likened Judah to a “corrupt, wild vine,” an image Jesus used when he said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (Jn 15:5-6; see Jer. 2:21). The obvious affinity that Jesus had for Jeremiah’s message underscores its significance for his disciples today.

### **Return to Me**

Redemption, not condemnation, was at the heart of Jeremiah’s message. At the center of this spiraling whirlwind of judgment was a message of hope. The eye of the storm was calm. There were flashes of light and hope penetrating an otherwise dark and doomed situation. Jeremiah issued the Lord’s impassioned appeal to return to him. He began with the northern kingdom of Israel (3:11-12), a sign that the message of hope extended to all those who were lost, and emphasized the Lord’s mercy (3:12), election (3:14), filial faithfulness (3:19), healing (3:22), and blessing (4:2). As a sign of the sincerity and comprehensiveness of the appeal, the Lord’s “Return to me” message was repeated four times (3:12, 14, 22; 4:1). It is also an indication that Jeremiah gave this message repeatedly. It was a message of renewal based on God’s mercy and his desire to be intimate with his people. “‘Return, faithless people,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I am your husband’” (3:14). In spite of their faithlessness and the “stubbornness of their evil hearts” (3:17) God was eager to treat them as family and give them an inheritance. Consider the pathos behind the line, “I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me” (3:19). In the midst of an intentionally intimidating message of judgment, Jeremiah expressed God’s longing for an intimate relationship with his people. His prophecy anticipates “the Spirit of sonship” whereby “we cry, ‘Abba, Father,’” because “the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:15-16).

Jeremiah’s message of hope looks forward to a new day when Zion will be home to God’s elect. True shepherds with a heart for God, instead of greedy, dysfunctional leaders (2:8; 5:31; 6:13-14), will lead the people “with knowledge and understanding” (3:15). Jeremiah’s Spirit-inspired vision of a new covenant, renders the old covenant with its ark and ethnic privilege obsolete, because all the nations will gather around the throne of the Lord in Jerusalem (3:16-18). Jeremiah anticipates that day when “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10).

Having explored the reasons and motivation for returning to the Lord, Jeremiah explained *how* to return. In contrast to his anguished description of the complexities of evil, Jeremiah offered a simple way home to the Lord, “Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the Lord your God...” (3:13). He even went so far as to give them the words to say. He wrote out their confession for them. In effect he led them in prayer, saying, “*Yes, we will come to you, for you are the Lord our God. Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a*

*deception; surely in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel. From our youth shameful gods have consumed the fruits of our fathers' labor—their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters. Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the Lord our God, both we and our fathers; from our youth till this day we have not obeyed the Lord our God.” (3:22-25)*

For the people confronted by Jeremiah, repentance was a foreign concept, but that was no excuse for not delivering the Lord's message. Their complex strategies of self-deception and a long history of resistance to repentance made it doubly hard, but Jeremiah persisted. He declared what the Lord wanted him to say, “Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts...” (4:3-4). The agricultural metaphors of unplowed ground and thorns bring to mind Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils (Mk 4:1-20; Mt 13:1-23; Lk 8:1-15). Jeremiah was working in a tough field. The people were really into religious rituals like circumcision, but these rituals had long since ceased to symbolize true faith in Yahweh and obedience to his word. Nevertheless Jeremiah was called to be bold and to minister with undaunted courage. The Lord promised, “I will make my words in your mouth a fire and these people the wood it consumes” (5:14). On another occasion the Lord used a telling image to describe Jeremiah and to visualize the people's resistance to his ministry. The Lord said, “I have made you a tester of metals and my people the ore, that you may observe and test their ways. They are all hardened rebels, going about to slander. They are bronze and iron; they all act corruptly. The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out. They are called rejected silver, because the Lord has rejected them” (6:27-30).

Jeremiah's message brings the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ to the crossroads. We stand at the intersection of a true passion for Christ and a life-deadening religion-as-usual. Every era faces the tragic temptation to reduce God to a jilted lover, an abandoned spouse, whose redemptive love is spurned with either cold-shoulder neglect or out-right contempt. We remember how seriously the Lord treated the church at Ephesus. Although they performed good deeds, they had lost their first love. We need to hear the warning that they heard, “Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first” (Rev 2:5). We don't want our devotion to God to be but a forgotten memory as it was for Judah (Jer 2:2), but instead we want it to be a living, vital relationship that grows and deepens as we learn to trust and obey our risen Lord. Jeremiah's prophecy confronts us with a choice: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (6:16). As the Lord's prophet, Jeremiah's “Return-to-me” message remains effective preparation for Jesus' “Come-to-me” message, because there is only one source for true rest and love. “Come to me,” Jesus said, “all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

