

Route Sixty-Six

Part Twenty-Four

Jeremiah

No Balm in Gilead?

(John 5:39 Jeremiah 9:23, 24)

With Study Questions

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Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty *man* glory in his might, Nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches; ²⁴ But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I *am* the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

Introduction

Often have I pondered and been stirred and encouraged in comparing the ministries of Jeremiah and Jonah. One might even say that contrasting these two prophets has formed a ministerial theme by which I have sought to govern my ministerial efforts. How were these two similar and how were they different?

One might argue that their only similarity was their prophetic office. Their audience was different. Their attitudes were different. And their outward effectiveness was different.

Jeremiah prophesied right in the bosom of the covenant people, Judah and Israel. Jonah prophesied to the enemies of God's people, Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria. Jeremiah was obedient and heartbroken as he sought repentance among his fellow countrymen. Jonah was resistant and cold in the mission God had set before him. Jeremiah was utterly ineffective in achieving any form of grateful response or repentance in the target of his ministry. Jonah, by some estimations, had a million converts.

So, who would a church hire? Jeremiah or Jonah?

We should be a bit careful before we blurt out an answer. It is not as if numbers have no significance at all. At the beginning of the New Covenant church, the Spirit of God found it fitting to give a tally of the converts.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41).

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand (Acts 4:4).

It is possible to have an unhealthy contentment with outward ineffectiveness. We might be quick to comfort ourselves that our churches are empty due to the **“offense of the cross” (Galatians 5:11)**, when there might be many other offenses that are not so flattering. The offense of neglect, coldness, self-centeredness, indifference may all contribute.

At the same time, the mega-church movement might be too quick to hire a Jonah due to his utilitarian value. How ideal for the fulfillment of the Great Commission, not to mention the church budget, to have a man in the pulpit who converts millions. Of course, my illustration has its limitations. The message of judgment that Jonah will bring (we will examine when we get there) would not be easily accepted in the western mega-church. When we get right down to it, Jonah still spoke the word of God.

In this introduction I am not focused on the pragmatism of successful ministry (at least not in what I have always drawn from the comparison of the two prophets). I am talking about that which is precious to God, over and above outwardly successful ministry.

When we look at Jonah, we learn many things to avoid: Disobedience to God; disinterest in the salvation of sinners; impatience and frustration. When we look at Jeremiah, we see one of the greatest Old Testament prophets exhibiting the obedience, love, sorrow, courage and patience of Christ. How Jeremiah would have loved to have been as effective as Jonah! If you truly desire to minister at any level, never be a Jonah at the expense of being a Jeremiah.

In forty years of ministry, never a convert. Truly Jeremiah provides an example of true biblical love, a love that **“endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7)**. The true laborer of Christ, labors not for reciprocation, but in response to Christ having labored for us, to deliver us from death and darkness. We, along with Jeremiah, are to imitate Christ:

...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

Survey of Jeremiah

What is the book of Jeremiah about? He prophesied roughly eighty to one hundred years after Isaiah (roughly 600 b.c.). His ministry lasted about forty years and extended through five kings (Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah). The book is not an easy read because it is not all in chronological order. The historical context of Jeremiah has been called *Judah's Midnight Hour*. Where Isaiah still was a distance from captivity and exile of Judah, Jeremiah was in the midst of it. God's people were about to enter a very difficult chapter in their existence.

How does God prepare us for the trials that are ahead? Jeremiah's ministry would be so marked with difficulty that he is known as *The Weeping Prophet*. What do I need to know that will prepare me? We see in the opening chapter:

**Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: ⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”
⁶Then said I: “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I *am* a youth.”⁷ But the Lord said to me: “Do not say, ‘I *am* a youth,’ For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. ⁸Do not be afraid of their faces, For I *am* with you to deliver you,” says the Lord (Jeremiah 1:4-8).**

Let us not enter any quest or any season without a hearty acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God in the events before us and His preparation and choosing of us for whatever the day may bring. Jeremiah

needed to know that God knew him before he was yet formed. Let all Christians enjoy and be emboldened and comfort that God “foreknew” us (Romans 8:29).

And God did not merely foreknow but He also ordained Jeremiah to his office. Similarly, all believers are to embrace that **“whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son” (Romans 8:29)**. We have not accidentally fallen into the kingdom of God. Let us be comforted and given resolve in knowing there is Divine and sovereign purpose to all things.

We also see in the above, a Divine equipping. We, similar to Jeremiah, must recognize that God will equip us for the task at hand. As we often hear in the benediction, that the **“God of peace...equip you with everything good that you may do his will” (Hebrews 13:20, 21)**.

Jeremiah is also informed in advance that there will be difficulties. Again, God charges and comforts, **“do not be afraid...for I am with you” (Jeremiah 1:8)**. How should every believer also be charged and comforted with the knowledge that Christ is with us always, **“even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20)**.

The Old Testament Covenant people of God had become faithless and disobedient. First, they would deny, then they would defy the living God. They had played the harlot and God would issue **“a certificate of divorce” (Jeremiah 3:8)**. The consequence of this would be exile. To be sure, there is a promise of restoration, but let us be mindful of the wretched condition to which Judah had fallen.

They had evil thoughts (Jeremiah 4:14), accompanied by evil deeds. Jeremiah’s soul had become **“weary”** in contemplation of the **“murderers”** by which he was surrounded (Jeremiah 4:31). But there is a continual punish/restore, theme through the book.

But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you (Jeremiah 7:23).

In all of this, Jeremiah was no mere transmitter of information. He felt the ministry. Truly, we are to be governed by the truth of God’s word. But true ministers will find, in time (some sooner, some later, some more,

some less) that they cannot be indifferent to the joys and plights of their congregants. It is an all-call, but how much deeper for those who would minister, to...

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

And Jeremiah's weeping was great for there was...

...no balm in Gilead (Jeremiah 8:22).

Gilead was rich with this medicine, this balm for human wounds. But the balm for the iniquities of Judah would not be applied, nor even recognized as needed.

Yet you say, 'Because I am innocent, Surely His anger shall turn from me.' Behold, I will plead My case against you, Because you say, 'I have not sinned' (Jeremiah 2:35).

How like the Pharisees during the time of Christ.

Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³²I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31).

As earlier stated, Jeremiah was ministering within the boundaries of the covenant people of God. Unlike Nineveh, they were in a state of apostasy/backsliding-turning away from the things of God and God Himself. And in this respect, it mirrors our own western evangelicalism.

It is true that evangelicalism has never been pristine, but neither was Judah. We should not think of going back to better days in some sort of foggy nostalgia (keep in mind, the past led to the present). No, we are to move forward to wiser and more godly days. This, we shall see, is the promise given-a future superior to the past. But let us be aware of that which deteriorates a people. It was true of Judah and it is true today.

National decline and is due to the disregarding and disobeying of God. And it has been said:

Once national downgrade has set in, it is not easy to check the momentum. The wrong which is indulged in by those in authority soon becomes the fashion among the people at large.¹

The answer to their swirling into the pit was on the lips of Jeremiah—the word of God. Yet the king burned God’s message in the fire (Jeremiah 36:27) and put God’s message and messenger in a dungeon (Jeremiah 38:6).

I spoke to you in your prosperity, *But* you said, ‘I will not hear (Jeremiah 22:21).

To whom shall I speak and give warning, That they may hear? Indeed their ear *is* uncircumcised, And they cannot give heed (Jeremiah 6:10).

God spoke to them in their prosperity and they *would* not hear. He spoke to them in their adversity and they *could* not hear. In the midst of their rejection of the truth, there was no shortage of liars and their lies. False prophets were in abundance. But the lies do not fear the truth.

“The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What *is* the chaff to the heat?” says the Lord. ²⁹ “*Is* not My word like a fire?” says the Lord, “And like a hammer *that* breaks the rock in pieces (Jeremiah 23:28, 29)?

It is little wonder that those who promote lies, as moved by the father of lies (John 8:44), are not merely concerned with telling lies, but halting the truth.

Judah was end in captivity in Babylon where God would not entirely abandon them but preserve and instruct them. They were to live their peacefully, build houses and have families, pursue and pray for peace

¹ Baxter, 269.

(Jeremiah 29:5-7). All I will briefly state here is that there are some who view the entire world as Babylon and us as exiles. As one Christian said to me as I sought to apply my Christian faith in life and culture, "Why are you so concerned with Babylon?" As if I should remain in my Christian cloister. I am concerned with Babylon, because I love the Babylonians. God would have me minister to the Babylonians. I am called to pray for it (Jeremiah 29:7). How should I pray?

Of course, the Babylonians would eventually be destroyed by the Medes, the Medes by the Greeks, the Greeks by the Romans and so forth. But there is a wonderful promise that outlives all those kingdoms.

Christ in Jeremiah

Where is Christ in Jeremiah? Yes, there is the more immediate fulfillment of these promises and the rebuilding of the wall, city and temple. But the promise goes beyond the history of Israel and extends in a deeper, stronger, larger and more vital way to the ends of the earth through knowing God.

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty *man* glory in his might, Nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches; ²⁴ But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I *am* the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

From Adam to the last man standing, our peace is found in knowing and seeking to understand God-the God who exercises lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness on the earth. The true balm of Gilead.

It was in anticipation of their return to the Promised Land that God uttered those comforting and strengthening words:

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

To what extent this applies to any people in the course of history is determined by their inclusion among the covenant people of God. This is a promise to God's people and may apply to the individuals, families, churches, communities, cultures and nations made up of those people. For the promise extends across the borders of time and nations. Jeremiah, on more than on occasion, sets on sights on the ultimate fulfillment of restoration and redemption. Let us finish with a consideration of these words:

In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David A Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved, And Jerusalem will dwell safely. And this is the name by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS ¹⁷“For thus says the Lord: ‘David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel (Jeremiah 33:15-17).

And what Man would sit on the throne of David, the king? Who would be that King? Speaking of David, Peter taught:

Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption (Acts 2:30, 31).

The ultimate promise from the lips of Jeremiah, the promise of the true and eternal future and hope is the promise kept in and by Christ. He is the means by which we come to know and understand God unto life. This is most certainly contained in those words uttered from the lips of our Savior

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Questions for Study

1. Compare Jeremiah to Jonah. How were they similar? How were they different? What can you learn from this (pages 2, 3)?
2. Are numbers important to God? Explain your answer (page 3).
3. What was the condition of Judah during the ministry of Jeremiah (page 4)?
4. Is it important to understand the sovereignty of God in our Christian life? Why or why not (pages 4, 5)?
5. What is the balm of Gilead (page 6)?
6. How can the leaders of a nation affect its citizens (pages 6, 7)?
7. To what extent should we fear the lies? Explain (page 7).
8. How is today's world like Babylon? How is it not like Babylon? What are some dangers here (pages 7, 8)?
9. Jeremiah was written six hundred years before Christ. Do we see Jesus in Jeremiah? How (pages 8, 9)?

