

Jeremiah: Prophet of Tears
10/09/11 **Jeremiah 1**
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This morning, in our exploration of “50 Old Testament Stories every Christian Should Know,” we are going to make some pretty big leaps through history. In fact, we’re going to cover about 200 years in just a couple of sentences, and all of the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations in one sermon, so hang on!

Last week we told the story of Isaiah’s vision and his call to prophesy at the funeral of King Uzziah of Judah in about 750 BCE. The reign of Uzziah marked a resurgence of power and glory for Judah even while Israel, to the north, under threat from the Assyrian Empire, was teetering on the verge of collapse.

In 722 BCE, king Hoshea of Israel, who had been placed on the throne by Assyria to serve as a vassal or puppet king, revolted against Assyria in a bid for independence. Shalmanezar V, king of Assyria, personally led the siege of Samaria, which fell in less than a year.

The Assyrians imprisoned Hoshea, dissolved the nation of Israel, and dispersed the people. The ten tribes of Hebrews that made up Israel were scattered across the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the southern Hebrew kingdom of Judah had allied itself with Egypt so Shalmanezar decided to ignore them rather than risk a war with the Pharaoh.

About five years later (716 BCE), after things cooled off, King Hezekiah of Judah would reach out to the survivors from the ten tribes who still were living in the area and invite them to come to Judah and unite with the two tribes who lived there. His goal was to reunite the original twelve tribes under his leadership. As part of this effort he would order his court historians to publish a new history of the Hebrew people which would become the books we know as *Joshua*, *Judges*, *I Kings* and *II Kings*.

Skip ahead another 15 years to 701 BCE.

The king of Assyria is now Sennacherib and his empire is even bigger and more powerful than his father’s. Emboldened and hungry to expand his sphere of influence, he turns his eye south to Judah and decides to take it under his wing. He besieges the city of Jerusalem and after about six months the city surrenders. Sennacherib loots the temple, removes all symbols of Yahwism and replaces them with those from the Assyrian pantheon. When Hezekiah dies in 686 BCE, Sennacherib replaces him with a vassal named Manasseh who is more Assyrian than he his Hebrew.

Kings come and go for about forty years and nothing much changes; Assyrian culture and religion prevail in Judah. Then, in 641 BCE Josiah, the grandson of Manasseh, becomes king but he is nothing like his grandfather. He is a worshiper of YHWH, a pious Hebrew and, by all accounts, a good man. Unfortunately, there isn’t much he can do to change things.

See, the nation of Judah had actually flourished under Assyrian rule. Not the whole nation, of course, but certainly the rich had become richer. And under Assyrian rule they were not required to obey the laws of the Torah that governed such things as interest rates, foreclosures, charity for the poor, and the fair treatment of laborers, indentured servants and slaves.

Every level of law and enforcement, from the courts to the soldier on the street, had been corrupted through an intricate, widely practiced, and generally accepted system of bribery and graft. Lawmakers, most of whom were Assyrian or Hebrews who had embraced their Assyrian masters, could be bought and sold and the laws they passed inevitably favored those who had enough money to pay bribes.

No matter how much Josiah wanted to change the country, he was a ruler in name only, with very little real power, and his hands were often tied.

So, God, decided to take a hand in things and he did so by sending a prophet to address the problems.

ENTER JEREMIAH

The village of Anathoth is a farming community which lies about three miles north and west of Jerusalem. In 701 BCE, when Sennacherib of Assyria had marched his army south in his effort to expand Assyria’s borders, Anathoth was just a little speck on the map between him and his target, Jerusalem.

He burned the entire village to the ground and killed everyone who didn’t flee fast enough. The smoke from the burning village was meant to be a warning to the city of Jerusalem of what awaited them if they did not surrender peacefully.

Years later, Anathoth was rebuilt by its inhabitants and flourished as a center of agriculture, feeding the hungry urban masses of Jerusalem, but the Anotites, as they were called, never got over their hatred of the Assyrians. The head elder of the town was a priest of YHWH, a wealthy land owner, and gentleman farmer named Hilkiyah and he had a son he assumed, would become a priest/farmer like himself. The boy’s name was Jeremiah.

YHWH had other plans, however, and it was this young man, Jeremiah, that he called to be his prophet to the people of Judah. The call came to Jeremiah when he was between 12 and 16 years of age.

You've probably heard the old axiom that "God doesn't call those who are equipped; God equips those who are called." Well, never was this truer than with Jeremiah.

In the opening chapter of the book of Jeremiah, the boy receives the call in a dream and he wakes up and the first thing he says is, "I can't do this; I'm just a kid." YHWH isn't buying it, however. He responds, "*Don't say, 'I'm just a kid.' I'm going to go with you. You're going to go to the people I tell you to go to and you're going to tell them what I tell you to tell them and I'm going to be right there with you all the time to protect you.*" (1: 7-8)

And that pretty much seals the deal. Jeremiah's only request is for a couple of years to prepare himself, which God allows. Jeremiah takes his best friend, Baruch, with him and the two boys make a road trip through Judah, assessing the situation and trying to figure out where to start. The rest of the book of Jeremiah is dedicated to their story which covers about 40 years.

THE SITUATION IN JUDAH

One of the problems we discover with reading the book of Jeremiah is that it is not presented to us chronologically. It starts out well, with the first chapter telling us about Jeremiah's call to the prophetic ministry, but then it breaks down – chronologically speaking.

Someone would do us a huge favor if they would take the book and rearrange all of the stories and sermons and psalms it contains in the order in which they occurred and were written. A student of the book who wants to find the story, however, must comb through it with a timeline, picking a reference here and an allusion there and plotting each literary offering according to its proper place in the overall story.

Given the great amount of literature that the book contains (52 chapters), the disorder in which it is offered, and the brief amount of time we have before us, I have chosen to pluck some things out of the book and present them, as best I can, in what scholars believe to be proper chronological order.

So, first we look at some stories about Jeremiah and Baruch's road trip. What did they see? What did they find? Well, it wasn't pretty.

Idolatry was rampant, of course. The Assyrian pantheon was everywhere and had been for nearly sixty years by now. Worship of YHWH was done in secret, at wayside and family temples, or not at all. And because YHWH was not being worshiped, his laws were not being followed or even acknowledged.

One particular story that has been handed down through extra-biblical sources tells of how the two young men are invited to stay with a wealthy Hebrew landowner who is anxious to demonstrate to them that his wealth has not corrupted him.

As an example of his kind, thoughtful and uncorrupted character he takes them to his grinding yard where slaves turn a huge, heavy, grinding wheel to grind grain into flour. He explains to Jeremiah and Baruch that the work of these giants would be so tedious as to drive a normal man insane, walking in a circle, turning a heavy stone, hour after hour, day after day, seven days a week, with never a break except for food and water. Normal men would never be able to keep it up while looking at the freedom and beauty around them that other people were experiencing and they could not.

So, to prevent his slaves from suffering in this way, out of the goodness of his heart, he had had them all blinded. Now, he explains, they would not be troubled by looking upon the freedom that others enjoyed. And he expected the young prophet to congratulate him on his humanity and kindness.

He really did!

The law allowed that the indenture on indentured servants could run no longer than seven years and then the servant had to be freed and given a grub stake to start his new life. It also held that slavery pertained to only one generation and that the children of slaves – Hebrew or gentile – were to be free. If a family went bankrupt and had to sell their land, the law allowed that members of their extended family had first rights of purchase on the land so that it always stayed in the same family. And any land purchased from one family by another was restored to the original family on the seventieth anniversary of the sale -- the Jubilee.

All of these laws we being routinely ignored and were going universally unenforced.

Indentured servants were trapped into cycles of indenture that never ended and even managed to leave the indentured person's children indebted to the lender. The children of slaves were being bought and sold as slaves and the courts were routinely deciding for landlords and lenders over family members when it came time to purchase foreclosed land.

All of these activities were illegal and all of them were destroying families, making the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Finally, Jeremiah observed – not during the reign of Josiah but, later, during the reign of Josiah's sons -- that the country's foreign policy was being based on short sighted, short term gains that enriched the wealthy but did not take into account the big picture or the distant future.

We'll come back to that one in a few minutes. First, we'll see how Jeremiah attacked the first three problems – idolatry, the excesses of the aristocracy, and the corruption of the legal process through graft and corruption.

PROPHET AGAINST PROFIT

Immediately after returning from his road trip to evaluate the country, Jeremiah applied for and got a job as tutor to the children of the royal family. This put him in close proximity to the king and those boys who would, eventually, be king. He and king Josiah got along well and five years later, in 623 BCE, when Assyria began to have troubles at home, Jeremiah and Josiah took the opportunity to start a reform movement.

The first thing they did was cleanse the temple of any and all Assyrian idols and begin a campaign to make extensive renovations to the old temple which had fallen into disrepair. One day, during the renovations, the workers “found” a “lost” ancient scroll of the book of Deuteronomy inside one of the walls of the temple.

Scholars have debated just how authentic this “discovery” was, whether it was a genuine discovery or one manipulated by the king and the prophet in order to buttress their reform movement, but there was no denying that it was a very old copy of the second book of the law. Jeremiah and Josiah declared it a miracle and public readings were scheduled where anyone who was anyone was required to attend.

There followed from those readings a campaign of reform that saw all Assyrian idols cleared from the country and the return of Yahwism as the only religion AND law of the land as Assyria continued to be plagued by rebellion and revolution at home.

Finally, in 612 BCE, Media, north of Assyria saw her opening and attacked Assyria, captured the capital city of Nineveh, looted it and left it in ashes. There was dancing in the streets of Jerusalem; the Assyrian yoke had been broken. Or had it?

Seven years later (605 BCE) the Assyrians regrouped and attacked the Medes near the city of Haran. Realizing that they are outmanned, the Assyrians call on their old friends, the Egyptians for help. Egypt sends an army north but Josiah of Judah doesn't want them to help the Assyrians so he marches his army out to the plain of Har Megiddo and tries to turn the Egyptian army back.¹

He doesn't succeed in turning the Egyptians back but he does succeed in stalling them so they are unable to provide timely help to their allies, the Assyrians. Unfortunately, Josiah is killed in the battle at Megiddo and the combined Egyptians and Assyrians are defeated by the Medes and the Babylonians at the battle of Carchemish. The general who ended up leading the combined Median and Babylonian force is the crown prince of Babylon, an ambitious young fellow named Nebachadnezzar.

Back in Judah, the Hebrews rush to place Josiah's youngest son, Jehoahaz on the throne as king. Jehoahaz is an independent thinker and likely to continue and protect Josiah's reforms. He is not the choice of the Egyptians, however, and when they pass through Palestine on their way home from their defeat at Carchemish they are in a foul mood. Three months after he was placed on the throne by his countrymen, Jehoahaz is removed from that throne by the Egyptians and hauled off to Egypt to live there in exile. The Egyptians place his brother, Jehoiakim on the throne, levy heavy taxes on him and his people and tell him that if he wants to keep on living he'd better pay up.

Jehoiakim, it turns out, is nothing like his father, Josiah.

He never liked the Deuteronomic Reforms that were instituted by his father and Jeremiah and he sets out to dismantle them as quickly as possible. A ruthless despot, he imprisons or executes anyone, who opposes him. One of those executed is a prominent prophet and a friend of Jeremiah.

THE EVIL JEHOIAKIM

One story will suffice to show what kind of king, indeed, what kind of person, Jehoiakim was.

Jeremiah had been preaching, off and on, in the streets and on the porch of the palace and the temple and his message was pretty much the same. Leave off all idolatry and stop exploiting the poor. If you don't, God will punish this nation and he is, in fact, preparing the instrument he will use to punish us and that instrument's name is Nebuchadnezzar.

So often did he preach on this subject that everyone who knew who he was would leave when they saw him coming. So, he decided to dictate a whole sermon to Baruch and have Baruch take the sermon to the palace and read it aloud to the king and his court in a sort of sneak attack.

So that's what he did. He dictated it and Baruch wrote it down and rolled it up and took it to the palace and told the king that he wanted to read a message to him.

The king agreed. He was sitting on his throne with a little brazier sitting next to him grilling some snacks and as Baruch read the scroll he would unwind it and Jehoiakim would reach up with a little knife he was using to grill his snack and cut the bottom off the scroll and toss it into the fire on his brazier.

Finally, Baruch had finished reading and as he did the king took the last little piece of the scroll and dropped it into the fire and burned it as well. Jeremiah's sermon was gone.

When Baruch returned to Jeremiah with the news, the prophet stormed around for a while then he had Baruch sit down and write while he dictated the entire sermon to him again “and many other additional words as well.”

Well, I can just imagine.

¹ It is from this battle on this plain that we get the mythical “Battle of Armageddon.” Har Megiddo = Armageddon.

Three years after Jehoiakim was placed on the throne of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar marched his army through Palestine and declared Judah his own while on his way to conquer Egypt. But he suffered severe losses against Egypt and had to retreat.

Seeing his new conquerors defeated and in retreat, Jehoiakim decided, over Jeremiah's objections, to stop paying taxes to Babylon. So Nebuchadnezzar halted his retreat at Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. After a year, Jehoiakim was assassinated and his young son, Jehoiakin agreed to surrender himself if Nebuchadnezzar would agree not to destroy the city.

Nebuchadnezzar agreed. He took Jehoiakin and about 10,000 of the country's leaders into exile in Babylon, imprisoned Jehoiakin in the dungeon, there, and told the rest that they were free to make a living as best they could in the city but they couldn't leave. He then placed Zedekiah, Jehoiakin's uncle, on the throne in Jerusalem, doubled the taxes, and left.

ZEDEKIAH AND THE FALL OF JUDAH

Years ago, when Jeremiah was working as the royal tutor, one of the children he had tutored was little Zedekiah whom he knew to be weak of both mind and will. Now, when he offered his services as advisor to the king, Zedekiah jumped at the chance to have the help of his old teacher.

Unfortunately, Jeremiah was not the only one with the king's ear. As a vassal of Babylon, the chief responsibility of the king was to collect the tribute taxes that were due each year to Nebuchadnezzar and it was to the aristocracy that he turned for most of those tax dollars. The aristocracy had managed to manipulate the economy so that they now held more than 90 percent of the country's wealth even though they were only about 2-3 percent of the population. It was only to be expected that the king would turn to them when it came time to cough up the protection money demanded by Babylon.

The aristocracy, however, were rather shortsighted when it came to foreign relations. Hadn't Egypt just defeated Babylon in battle? Hadn't Egypt's taxes been only half of what Babylon demanded?

So when a mutiny broke out in the army of Babylon in 595 BCE, the Aristocracy came to Zedekiah and began to push for a pro-Egypt foreign policy, even in favor of withholding tax payments to Babylon. Jeremiah was against it. He saw Nebuchadnezzar not just as a powerful foreign king, but as an instrument of YHWH, poised to punish Judah if they opposed YHWH's will. Many of the sermons he preached at this time were sermons against the Egyptians, and against trusting in the power of weapons when God's will was for God's people to live humbly and peacefully.

It took eight years but, eventually, two things happened that the aristocrats were able to use to undermine Jeremiah's influence with the king.

First, a letter was uncovered that he had sent to the 10,000 Hebrews living in exile in Babylon. In this open letter he told them to plan for a long stay: *"Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughter; and multiply there and do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile; and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare."* (29: 5-7)

Jeremiah was commending to them the revolutionary notion that YHWH didn't live in Palestine but went with his people wherever they were, that they could, in fact, be faithful followers of YHWH in a foreign land. The aristocracy and their false prophets, however, convinced the king that praying for the welfare of Babylon, as Jeremiah was telling the people to do, was tantamount to treason.

The second thing that undermined Jeremiah's authority was his purchase of some land outside of Jerusalem. This was land that his family had mortgaged to another family and he was buying it back for his family, as the law allowed, to show the people that even if Jerusalem fell to Babylon, God still had a future planned for his people.

His enemies, however, managed to convince King Zedekiah that this was evidence that he was a traitor in league with the Babylonians.

His credibility damaged, in jail (Baruch and his friends would later break him out of jail), and out of favor with the king, Jeremiah's influence was nil. Weak Zedekiah allowed himself to be persuaded by the aristocracy to withhold tribute to Babylon. And, immediately, Nebuchadnezzar marched south to lay siege to the city of Jerusalem and make an example of the Hebrews.

The siege would last three years, during which time Jeremiah would try to broker a settlement between Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar. And, again, he would be accused of treason and imprisoned.

Finally, in 586 BCE, the water ran out, disease and malnutrition had decimated the population of the city, the army was broken and demoralized and, on July 18, the army of Babylon breached the wall of the city.

Zedekiah and his family escaped through a secret passage but were captured outside the city. He was forced to watch as his family were all beheaded, then he was blinded and taken, in chains, back to the dungeons of Babylon where he was never heard from again. The temple and most of the city of Jerusalem were razed to the ground and some 50,000 people were taken back to Babylon in chains.

Jeremiah was freed from prison by Nebuchadnezzar and his land restored to him but when he heard of how Zedekiah was treated, he cursed the Babylonian king and told him, in essence, "You could have been great but you chose to be evil. Now YHWH has abandoned you. Your empire stops here." And it did. From that day on the Babylonian

Empire would be plagued with revolt and war and never expand again. Nebuchadnezzar would die twenty years later, still a relatively young man and his Empire would fall to the Persians in 539 without a single arrow being fired.

After the fall and destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of her people, Jeremiah stayed in Judah and tried to provide a sense of continuity and leadership to the remnant who were left behind. A friend of his, the leader of a prominent family, a man named Gedaliah was appointed by Nebuchadnezzar as governor of what was left of Judah but he was murdered by Ishmael, a member of the royal family who wanted to be king.

Ishmael was not supported, however, and, fearing a Babylonian reprisal, he fled to the Ammonites. Other Judeans also feared that Nebuchadnezzar would punish the entire country for the death of Gedaliah and, against Jeremiah's advice, fled to Egypt, forcing Jeremiah and Baruch to go with them.

In Egypt, Jeremiah and Baruch would write and collect their memoirs and publish them as what we have come to know as the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations. The last we would hear from the great "Prophet of Tears" would be a sermon against the Hebrews who had fled to Egypt and given up their identity trying to blend into Egyptian society, Egyptian culture and, most shameful of all, Egyptian religion.

BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON

As Jeremiah had watched the people of Judah being locked in chains and forced to march the 400 miles back to Babylon to live in a virtual ghetto, there, he asked YHWH to let him go with them, to offer them words of comfort and encouragement.

God's reply was that his Jeremiah's role had not been that of comforter but of agitator and he had done that well. YHWH was now ready for Jeremiah to retire; he would raise up another to speak words of comfort to the exiles.

So, while the people gathered by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and sang songs of sadness -- "By the rivers of Babylon, where we lay down, and we wept when we remembered Zion." -- another prophet received the call from God to rise and speak words of comfort and assurance to the people in exile.

He would inaugurate his ministry by taking a new name and he would find that name in the history of his people. It would be the name of another who lived as a prophet and spoke as the voice of YHWH. He would take the name, Isaiah.

And it is to his words of comfort, promise and hope that we turn next Sunday.

AMEN