

# Jeremiah

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## *Introductory Notes to Jeremiah*

### **I. The Man**

The name “Jeremiah” means “whom Jehovah appoints.” Apart from this appointment by God, certainly the prophet could not have continued to minister faithfully. He was of the priestly line and lived in the priests' city of Anathoth. Apparently he had some personal wealth because he was able to purchase real estate and even hire a scribe. He was called to the ministry when but “a child” (1:4–6); this was in the year 627 B.C.

## II. The Times

Jeremiah ministered during the last forty years of Judah's history, from the thirteenth year of Josiah (627 B.C.) to the destruction of Jerusalem and beyond (587 B.C.). He lists the kings during whose reigns he served (1:1–3), the last leaders of the once-prosperous kingdom of Judah. *Josiah* was a godly king; he died in 608 B.C. It was during his reign that the Law was found and the temple worship restored. *Jehoahaz* followed, but reigned only three months, so Jeremiah does not mention him. *Jehoiakim* was next (608–597 B.C.); he was a godless man and did his utmost to persecute Jeremiah. It was he who burned the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies in Jer. 36. *Jehoiachin* was the next king, but he too reigned just three months before being taken captive to Babylon. The last king was *Zedekiah* (597–586 B.C.); he presided over the ruin of the nation and the capture of the city of Jerusalem. So, the Prophet Jeremiah lived to see his beloved nation go down into sin, war, and judgment; yet through it all he was faithful to preach God's Word throughout all the lands.

When Jeremiah began his ministry, Assyria was the leading power in the world, but Egypt and Babylon were rapidly gaining strength. In 607 B.C. the Babylonians took Nineveh and destroyed the power of Assyria. Babylon then turned to Judah, and Judah's "politicians" advised the king to ask Egypt for help. Jeremiah was always against an Egyptian alliance. He knew that Judah's only hope was the Lord, but her sins were so great, the nation had lost the blessing of God. Babylon finally did capture Judah and take Jerusalem (606–586). Jeremiah wrote Lamentations to commemorate the death of the Holy City.

## III. The Message

Jeremiah's task was not an easy one because he had to sound the death knell for his nation. The first part of his book records several of his sermons, given in Jerusalem, in which he denounces the people, priests, and princes for their sins, especially the sin of idolatry. In chapter 25 he announces that the nation will go into captivity for seventy years, and then return to reestablish the nation. In chapter 31 he prophesies a "new covenant" between Jehovah and His people, not a covenant of law and works written on stones, but a covenant of love and faith, written in the heart. In the final chapters, Jeremiah deals with the Gentile nations around Judah and tells of God's plans for them.

One of the key words in the book is "backslide" (2:19; 3:6, 8, 11–12, 14, 22; 49:4). The nation had turned her back on the Lord and was following false prophets who led them to worship idols. Eleven times the word "repent" is used by the prophet, but the nation did not repent. We read of Jeremiah weeping, so burdened was he for his fallen nation. See 9:1; 13:17; 14:17; 15:17–18; and Lam. 1:2; 2:11, 18. Because he prophesied the captivity and told the kings to surrender to Babylon, Jeremiah was called a traitor and was persecuted by his own people. No OT prophet faced more opposition from false prophets than did Jeremiah (see 2:8, 26; 4:9; 5:31; 6:14; 14:13–16; 18:18; 23:9–40; 26:8–19; 27:9–16; chaps. 28 and 29). If Judah had repented and turned to God, He would have delivered them from Babylon. Because they persisted in their sins, the nation had to be punished, but then God promised restoration "for His name's sake." Jeremiah used many dramatic illustrations to get his messages across: fountains and

cisterns (2:13); medicine (8:22); a “good-for-nothing” girdle or sash (13:1–11); a clay vessel (chaps. 18–19); yokes (chap. 27); drowning a book (51:59–64).

#### **IV. Jeremiah and Jesus**

The similarities between Jeremiah and Jesus Christ are worth noting. Neither married (16:2), and both were rejected by their own towns (11:21 and 12:6 with Luke 4:16–30). Jeremiah ministered under the menacing shadow of Babylon, Jesus under the shadow of Rome. Both were considered traitors by their people. Jeremiah was viciously opposed by the false prophets, Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees, the false leaders of His day. Both wept over the city of Jerusalem, and both predicted its ruin. Jeremiah gathered few disciples about him; Jesus had a small following. Both were arrested falsely and persecuted. Both emphasized a religion of the heart, and not merely one of outward forms and ceremonies. It was Jeremiah 7:11 that Jesus quoted when He cleansed the temple and told the priests they had made it “a den of thieves.” Both emphasized the new covenant in the heart (Jer. 31:31–37; Heb. 8:7ff). In their preaching, both used striking illustrations and comparisons. Both revealed a tender, sympathetic heart that was crushed by the wickedness of a nation that should have obeyed God’s Word. In the end, it seemed that both were failures in their lives and ministries, but God honored them and made their work successful.

## **Jeremiah 18–19**

In chapter 18 the prophet visits the potter’s house and watches him mold the clay, while in chapter 19 he takes a completed vessel and breaks it in the Valley of Hinnom. The first event pictures God’s grace; the second, His judgment. As you consider the potter and the clay, you can see a picture of our lives and our relationship to God. Each object has a meaning.

### **I. God Is the Potter**

#### *A. A person.*

Our lives are not in the hands of some invisible “force” or blind “fate”; they are in the hands of a Person—Almighty God. God is not just our Creator; He is our Father, and He has a personal concern for our lives. He is the Potter. See Isa. 64:8.

#### *B. Power.*

Clay cannot mold itself; only God has the power to guide our lives. He makes it clear in 18:6–10 that He is sovereign over all people. We cannot be blessed if we argue with Him or try to tell Him what to do; see Rom. 9:20–24. Of course, this does not mean that God is to blame for the sins of men or the failures of nations.

### *C. A plan.*

The potter has a perfect plan for the clay; he sees the finished product in his mind. God has a perfect plan for our lives (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 1:6). We cannot see the finished product, but He promises us that it is wonderful (1 Cor. 2:9).

### *D. Patience.*

The potter patiently works the clay, tenderly molding its shape. God patiently directs in our lives, seeking to fulfill His will. Often He uses the hands of others to help shape us—parents, teachers, fellow Christians, even those who persecute us. It takes time to make a worthwhile product, and God is willing to wait.

## **II. We Are the Clay**

Of course, in Jeremiah's message the clay represented the people of Judah, but we are not wrong in applying it to our lives personally. Christians are God's vessels, molded by Him to contain the treasure of the Gospel (2 Tim. 2:19–21; 2 Cor. 4:7; Acts 9:15). Human beings are made of clay; clay is dust mixed with water. We are of the dust (Ps. 103:14), but the water of the Spirit of God has given us life through faith in Christ. Clay is of no great value in itself, but it can become something great if molded by the right hands for the right purpose. Nobody can calculate the tremendous potential in an individual's life.

The most important quality of clay is that it yields. If it fails to yield to the hands of the potter, it will be spoiled. The clay cannot mold itself; it must have the potter. There are no "self-made" Christians in the will of God. When we say "the clay cannot mold itself," we are not suggesting that people play no part in the fulfilling of God's will. We are not inactive or resigned, mere lumps of clay in God's hands. He wants us to cooperate with Him as we pray, meditate, obey His will, and yield to His tender touch.

## **III. Life Is the Wheel**

The wheel is spun around swiftly by the potter himself, and he alone controls its speed. Our lives as Christians are not controlled by chance or luck; they are controlled by God. He arranges the circumstances of life that mold us. It was God who arranged for young Joseph to go to Egypt where he was molded into a ruler. We may wonder about the circumstances of our lives and think that God has been unkind to us, but one day we will realize the truth of Romans 8:28 and agree that all things *did* work together for good. The most important thing about a wheel is not its size (some lives are shorter than others), but its center. If the wheel is "on center" then everything will be balanced. Christ is the center of the dedicated Christian's life (Matt. 6:33).

## **IV. Disobedience Is the Marring**

It would be wonderful if the clay always yielded to the potter's hands, but this is not the case. The prophet saw the vessel marred. Did the potter throw the clay away and start

with a new lump? No, he made it again. This is a picture of the rebellion of man and his restoration by God's grace. Why was the clay marred? Because it wanted to have its own way (see 18:11–12). How often we as Christians mar our own lives by making our own plans outside the will of God. If only we could see the finished product that God has planned we would never disobey Him. Alas, we think we know more about life than He does.

God is gracious to forgive and to “make us again.” Sometimes He must use difficult testings to get us to yield. He spent twenty years molding Jacob, who in the end became a useful vessel. After they were marred, God gave a second chance to David, Jonah, and Peter. First John 1:9 is a wonderful promise of forgiveness, but it is not an excuse for disobedience.

## **V. Trials Are the Furnaces**

Jeremiah does not mention the potter's furnaces, but they had to be there. No vessel is worth anything until it has gone through the furnace. The heat gives the clay strength and beauty and increases its usefulness and value. Life must have its furnaces. Job went through the furnace of pain (Job 23:10), and 1 Peter 4:12ff tells about the furnace of persecution. The three faithful Hebrew children went through that furnace and discovered that the Potter was in the fire with them (Dan. 3:19–25). God knows just how hot to make the furnace; He knows just how much trial we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). Christians who have lived sheltered lives outside God's furnaces miss many of the blessings of His grace received by those who have been willing to suffer with and for Christ. When trials come our way, we must yield to the Potter and let Him have His way.

## **VI. Breaking the Vessel Is Judgment**

In 19:1–13 Jeremiah went to the Valley of the son of Hinnom, a place the Jews had dedicated to the worship of idols. Some of the worst sins in Jewish history were committed in that place; see 7:31. The name “son of Hinnom” was written “ge-Hinnom” and eventually became “Gehenna” in the Greek language, the NT word for hell. King Josiah turned this idolatrous place into Jerusalem's garbage dump (2 Kings 23:10). What an awful picture of hell—the eternal garbage dump of the universe. This time the prophet brought a finished vase, and as he held it before the elders of the land, he preached a sermon of judgment. “You have forsaken God and worshiped idols here. You have sinned against His Word. But the day will soon come when this valley will not be called ‘Tophet’ (burning, or filth), but ‘the valley of slaughter.’ Judgment is coming to Judah.” Then he broke the vase—and it could never be repaired. See vv. 10–11. A nation or an individual life can get to the “point of no return.” If the clay becomes hard, it can no longer be molded. How important it is to yield to Christ early in life. Samson refused to yield, and God had to break the vessel. “There is a sin unto death” (1 John 5:16).

God wants us to be useful vessels. A vessel does not manufacture anything; it only receives, contains, and shares. We receive His blessings and share them with others. All that God asks is that we be available, clean, and empty. See 2 Tim. 2:19–21, where Paul warns us to be separated from sin. If we are too full of self, God cannot fill us, and

if we are not filled, we cannot share anything with others. May the Lord help us to be vessels for honor, fit for the Master's use.

## Jeremiah 36 and 45

Jeremiah had been preaching for more than twenty years when these events took place. Egypt had just been defeated by Babylon, so King Jehoiakim's "foreign policy" was ruined. The prophet knew that Babylon would one day take Judah captive, but he still longed to see his people repent. It takes a godly servant to continue ministering when the situation seems hopeless.

### I. The Inspiration of the Word (36:1–4)

Up to now, Jeremiah's ministry had been oral; he had preached in the temple courts and tried to awaken the backslidden nation. But God wanted Jeremiah's messages written down permanently as a part of His Word. In vv. 17–18 we see how this was done: God spoke to the prophet; Jeremiah spoke the words to his secretary, Baruch; and Baruch wrote them down. What Baruch wrote was a revelation from God, truths that no human being could have discovered for himself. The Bible is God's revelation to men and women; the truths that are in it could not have been discovered by the human mind. The Bible is the book of "Thus saith the Lord."

*Inspiration* is the word used to describe how the Bible was written. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" says 2 Tim. 3:16. This means that the Bible is "God-breathed"; it is not the manufactured product of the human mind. "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21, nkjv). The world speaks of great writers as being "inspired," but this is not what the Bible means by "inspiration." Shakespeare was an inspired writer in the human sense of greatness, but his writings were not inspired of God as is the Bible. The Spirit of God spoke to and through men of God to give us the Word of God. He did not bypass their personalities or make "robots" out of them; each Bible writer reveals his own individual personality in his writings. But what they wrote is the Word of God, final, complete, and authoritative. You can trust your Bible.

### II. The Proclamation of the Word (36:5–10)

By comparing v. 1 with v. 9 we get the impression that the writing of this book took at least a year. The people had asked for a special fast day, apparently to seek the help of the Lord against Babylon. The king granted this request, although later events showed that he had no respect for God or His Word. He was like many political leaders who go along with national "religious observances" yet reject Christ and the Word personally. Baruch proclaimed the Word by reading the book to the fasting people in the temple. Jeremiah was bound, but God's Word could not be bound (2 Tim. 2:9; see 2 Thes. 3:1–

2). It took courage for Baruch to do this, since Jeremiah was not a popular man in the city.

God has ordained that His Word should be spread by preaching and teaching. Certainly there is a place for Bible literature and tract distribution, but it is the preaching of the Word that God especially blesses. God uses His Word to convict people of sin, lead them to honest repentance, and then bring them the assurance of salvation (see v. 3). Baruch was seeking to warn Judah to flee to God's arms of mercy because judgment was approaching. Today we are seeking to win people to Christ because the wrath of God already is on them (John 3:36).

### **III. The Preservation of the Word (36:11–32)**

It is interesting to see how different people respond to the Word of God. Michaiah was present when Baruch read the Word in the temple before the chamber of the scribe, Gemariah, who was Michaiah's father. Michaiah was stirred by the Word and immediately shared it with the other leaders of the nation. They sent for Baruch, who read the Word a second time. The princes were now afraid (v. 16). Somebody must tell the king.

King Jehoiakim was a godless man who received his throne only by yielding to Egypt (2 Kings 23:31–24:7). He had already killed one prophet of God, Urijah (Jer. 26:20–24); and he was certainly no friend to Jeremiah. But he consented to listen to the reading as he sat comfortably in his winter house. He should have been in the temple, humbling himself before God. How gracious God was to bring the Word to him at a time when he needed it. But as Jehudi read the scroll, the king defiantly cut it to pieces and used it as fuel for his fire. There was no fear of God before his eyes. Three of the leaders protested (v. 25), but the king would not listen. Instead of yielding to the Word, he resisted it and sought to arrest and slay Jeremiah and Baruch.

Godless people have attacked the Bible for centuries, yet it still stands. Jeremiah wrote a new copy of his book, so the king's efforts were in vain. We still have Jeremiah's prophecy, but King Jehoiakim has long since turned to dust. Men and women who love sin oppose the Bible because the Bible exposes them and warns of the wrath to come. In A.D. 303 Emperor Diocletian of Rome sought out and burned copies of God's Word, and then erected a monument that read: "Extinct is the name of Christians." Twenty years later Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome and put the Bible back into the hands of the people. Haters of the truth persecuted Wycliffe because he translated the Bible into English; Tyndale was burned at the stake; yet the Bible is still here. God preserves His Word. "Forever, O Lord, Your Word is settled in heaven" (Ps. 119:89, nkjv). "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). The person who builds his life on the Bible builds on that which cannot be shaken.

To his new copy, Jeremiah added a special judgment for the king. Jehoiakim thought he would destroy the Word, but the Word destroyed him. He would die a miserable death and leave no heir to claim his throne (v. 30). See Jer. 22:18–19. His son Jehoiachin did take the throne when his father died, but he lasted only three months before being taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:6–12). And Babylon did come to

capture Judah, just as Jeremiah had prophesied. Fulfilled prophecy is one of the greatest evidences for the divine inspiration of the Bible.

#### **IV. The Consolation of the Word (45)**

This chapter records Baruch's reactions to the events of chapter 27. Here he had shared in the writing of the Word of God, yet he had to go into hiding to save his life. Instead of being honored for his faithfulness, he was forced to suffer persecution. What a great disappointment.

No doubt some of the king's associates offered Baruch "a good job" on the king's staff, since undoubtedly he was a gifted scribe. His brother Seraiah was one of the king's officers (32:12; 51:59). Why identify yourself with a hated preacher like Jeremiah when you can be a popular secretary to the king? God knew his heart, and God spoke to Jeremiah about it. "Are you seeking great things for yourself?" God asked Baruch. "Seek them not. There is no future in this land of Judah because Babylon will come and destroy the city and the land." Had Baruch forsaken Jeremiah and the Word for an "easy place" with the king, he would have lost everything. As it was, God protected his life and used him in His service.

It is not easy to stand true to the Word in days of opposition and persecution. Paul wrote, "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10, nkjv). And Paul himself, like Jeremiah and Baruch, suffered persecution and trouble because of the Word (2 Tim. 2:8-9), but at the close of his life, he was able to say, "I have kept the faith."

How are *you* treating God's Word? Are you putting it on the shelf? (36:20) Are you cutting it to pieces, as do the "modern critics" of the Bible? Are you seeking to destroy it? Or are you bowing before it and obeying its truths? "All Your precepts concerning all things I consider to be right; I hate every false way" (Ps. 119:128, nkjv).