

CALLED FOR A CRISIS

by Ray C. Stedman

With this message we begin a new series of studies in the book of Jeremiah. I want to say right at the outset that we do not intend to go through Jeremiah verse by verse as we have other books; that would take at least the rest of this year. Rather, we will take certain sections of the book which capture the thought and message of this great prophecy and bring it before our minds and hearts. There is much to learn from Jeremiah. I have come to love this book greatly, and think you will, too.

Perhaps many are not familiar with the book of Jeremiah. I know that Jeremiah is not the greatest of the prophets. Isaiah, I think, would be awarded that title. Nor is this the most difficult of the prophets to understand. Ezekiel would probably qualify there. But surely Jeremiah is the most heroic of all the prophets. For this young man began his ministry in the days of Josiah the king of Judah, and for forty-two years he preached in Judah, trying to awaken the nation to what was about to happen to it, to get them to turn around, to save the nation from the judgment of God. And in all those forty-two years, never once did he see any sign of encouragement. Never did he alter for one moment the headlong course of this nation toward its own destruction. Never did he see any sign that what he was saying had any impact at all upon these people. And yet he was faithful to his task. Through much personal sorrow and struggle and heartache and difficulty and danger, he performed what God had sent him to do. And in so doing, he left a tremendous record of the greatness of God, of the power of God over nations and his control of history, and of the hope which arises out of darkness.

I have chosen this series of studies because it is set in a time of crisis and of the moral decline of a nation. It reveals what is behind the death of a nation. In two years the United States of America will celebrate its two hundredth birthday. And it may be that in these very days, as we celebrate our Bicentennial as a nation, we also may be witnesses to the beginning of the end of the United States of America. There are some who feel this is so. I hope it is not true. But the forces which are destroying our nation are the same forces which destroyed the nation Jeremiah witnessed to. We can learn a great deal about what is going on in our nation's life by studying this great prophecy of Jeremiah. We can learn here how to behave in a time of national and personal crisis. What should a believer do when things are falling apart around him in his home, his community, his nation, and the world in which he lives? The answers are here. And from this prophecy we will also learn what is the word of hope in an hour of despair and darkness, and how God plants the seeds of new life in the midst of death and destruction all around. It is a great book, and I am sure we are going to reap enormous benefit as we go through it together.

In this opening chapter we have a full-length portrait of the prophet, and of the times in which he lived. The first three verses set the prophecy in its historical background:

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. {Jer 1:1-3 RSV}

That is a bare bones description of the circumstances and the times in which Jeremiah ministered. It does not give us much of the flavor of these days, but these were troublous times in the nation. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, had already been carried into captivity by Assyria a hundred years before. Now Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was rushing headlong on a course which was certain to lead it to the same judgment. Josiah, the last good and godly king of Judah, had come to the throne, and Jeremiah was born and began his ministry.

The prophecy of Jeremiah is a collection of his messages, interspersed with certain historical narrative which

provides background. It does not proceed chronologically. It jumps from here to there and back and forth in time, and it is necessary, if you wish to pursue the chronology, to piece it together. But there is a moral progress through the book which is very orderly, and it is that which we will follow. It began in the days of Josiah, and ended in the days of his son, Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, with the exile of Judah under the Babylonians.

Notice that we are introduced to the fact that Jeremiah is a priest, and the son of a priest. He was what today we would call a "P.K.", a preacher's kid, growing up in a town where only priests lived, Anathoth, one of the cities of Benjamin not far from Jerusalem. His father's name was Hilkiyah, a very common name. We are not certain just which Hilkiyah this is, but it is interesting that the high priest in the days of Josiah was named Hilkiyah.

The book of Second Kings tells us that this priest was rummaging around in the rooms of the temple one day, looking over some old records and money boxes which had been stored there for years, and down underneath a lot of dusty ledgers and whatnot he found a scroll. He brought it out, cleaned it off, and began to read it. And, to his amazement, he discovered it was a copy of the law of Moses! The nation had fallen so far that the Law had actually been lost and forgotten. This priest, Hilkiyah, was stunned by what he read. He sent it to Josiah the king, and he, too, was absolutely astonished by it, and frightened that the wrath of God would be poured out on them because they had not kept the Law. He made a covenant before the Lord to keep his commandments, and took away all the abominations and began what was to be the last national reform this nation experienced before its exile.

This high priest, Hilkiyah, may have been Jeremiah's father. Some scholars think he was; some are not so sure. At any rate Jeremiah began his ministry under Josiah the king, in the days when Josiah was trying desperately to set the kingdom right, moving with great authority and power to tear down the idols and restore the worship of Jehovah, and causing the new-found Law to be read to the people, that they might hear the words of God.

But the reform was merely transitory, for as soon as the king died everything deteriorated again. Jeremiah lived to see Jehoahaz, Josiah's son, rule for three months, and then be captured by Egypt and carried away in exile. He watched Assyria's might, up to the north, being crushed by the power of Babylon. And later Egypt itself was humbled at the Battle of Carchemish, one of the strategic battles of all time, in 605 B.C. Jeremiah saw the total domination of the world by Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, and at last the invasion of his own beloved land of Judah by the Babylonian armies, the surrounding of Jerusalem, the siege of the city, its overthrow, and the carrying away into Babylonian captivity of the people of Judah. Jeremiah was left in a desolated land, a land utterly ravaged by war. Then, betrayed by politicians, he was taken as a captive to Egypt where he died unknown, unhonored, unsung. Tradition tells us he was stoned to death by the very Jews whom he trusted as brothers.

Here was a man, then, who knew nothing of the outward encouragement of success, nothing at all. He was never to see his prophecies of healing and health for the land fulfilled. And yet, despite all this, he was absolutely faithful to the call of God. The heroism and courage of this man is tremendously remarkable to behold. This book has become a source of great encouragement to my own heart.

In the next few verses, 4 through 10, you have the call of Jeremiah by God. It is a remarkable account of how God prepared and sent this young man into a ministry. It is all God's work. God does the calling, he does the preparing, he provides the power. It is all of God. Notice, now, the preparation of God, in Verses 4-5:

**Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
"Before I formed you in the womb
I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations." {Jer 1:4-5 RSV}**

Is it not remarkable that when God began to talk to this young man and send him to his ministry, the first thing he did was to sit down and share with him the "Four Spiritual Laws" -- At least the first one: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Is not that what he is saying? "Before I formed you in the womb I

knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." This is the preparation of God. And the remarkable thing is that this preparation began long before Jeremiah was even conceived. In other words, God said, "I started getting you ready, and the world ready for you, long before you were born. I worked through your father and your mother, your grandfathers and grandmothers, your great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers. For generations back I have been preparing you." What a remarkable revelation to this young man -- that through the generations of the past God had begun to work!

You know, when men face a crisis, they always start looking for a program, some method with which to attack the crisis. When God sets about to solve a crisis, he almost always starts with a baby. Is not that interesting? All the babies God sends into the world, who look so innocent and so helpless -- and so useless -- at their birth, have enormous potential. There is nothing very impressive in appearance about a baby, but that is God's way of changing the world. And hidden in the heart of a baby are the most amazing possibilities. That is what God said to Jeremiah: "I've been working before you were born to prepare you to be a prophet, working through your father and your mother, and those who were before them."

History tells us that the mother of Sir Walter Scott loved poetry and art. It is no wonder that he followed his mother's loves in this way. The mother of Lord Byron was hot-tempered, proud, and violent. The mother of Napoleon Bonaparte was ambitious for herself and her children. The mother of John and Charles Wesley was a godly and devout woman, with great executive ability -- and, having nineteen children, she needed it! But God prepares for a child long before that child is born.

Now, if you read this account as though this were something extraordinary which applied only to Jeremiah the prophet, you have misread this whole passage. I often hear people say of some noted person, "When God made him, he broke the mold." That is true. When God made Abraham Lincoln he broke the mold. There has never been another like him. But what we fail to see is that this is true of every single one of us. There is nothing unusual about it. God never made another one like you, and he never will. God never made anyone else who can fill the place you can fill and do the things you can do. This is the wonder of the way God forms human life -- that of the billions upon billions who have been spawned upon this earth there are no duplicates. Each one is unique, prepared of God for the time in which he is to live. That is the word which came to Jeremiah, to strengthen him. "Look," God said, "I have prepared you for this very hour," as he has prepared you and me for this time, for this world, for this hour of human history.

Each of us is therefore both the goal toward which God has been working, and, at the same time, the preparation of someone yet to come. And we have a part in their work. I heard this week a story concerning the death of a young man whom some of you have known, David Kraft, who was the pastor of the Scotts Valley Baptist Church. His father is Dr. Roy Kraft, of the Twin Lakes Baptist Church in Santa Cruz. His uncle is our dear friend, Dr. Ralph Kraft, of Los Altos First Baptist Church. When David Kraft was dying of cancer just a few weeks ago, his father and uncle, who are twin brothers, came to see him. After visiting with them both a short while, David asked his uncle, "Would you mind if I talk to my Dad alone?" His uncle was glad to wait in the hall. When David's father came out, he and his brother went to get some coffee. When they sat down, Roy Kraft said, "I want to tell you what David did while we were alone. He called me over to his bed and said, 'Can I put my arms around you?' I stooped over as best I could and let him put his arms around me. 'And now, Dad, would you put your arms around me?' I could hardly keep control of my emotions, but I put my arms around him. Then, with his arms around me, he said, 'Dad, I just want you to know that the greatest gift God ever gave me, outside of salvation itself, was the gift of a father and mother who love God and taught me to love him, too.'"

That is what God is saying to Jeremiah. "What a gift you have! How I have prepared you for this moment, through the generations which lie behind you, that you might live and speak and act in this time in history."

And then, there is not only the preparation of God, but in Verses 6-8, the provision of God:

**Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.
" But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a youth',
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,**

**and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." {Jer 1:6-8 RSV}**

Jeremiah's response is to shrink from the call of God. Many a young man had done that before him. This is what Moses did, and Gideon, and Isaiah, and other mighty men of God. When God first laid hold of them and set them to a task, they shrank from it. Jeremiah pleads youth and inexperience, says he has no ability to speak, just as Moses did. So if you ever feel that way when God calls you to a task, just remember that you are in the prophetic succession! God's men often start out that way.

As best we can tell, Jeremiah was about 30 years old at this time. That is when young men began their ministry in Judah. By modern youth that is considered over the hill, beyond the time a man is capable of doing anything. But that is when God starts. Jesus was thirty years old when he began his ministry. Yet Jeremiah feels his inadequacy and his inexperience and his inability.

This, I think, marks the sensitivity of this young man. Throughout this whole prophecy you find him very responsive and sensitive to what is happening to him. He is called to stand before kings, to thunder denunciations and judgments, to feel the sharp lash of their recrimination against him, to endure their anger and their power, and to suffer with his people as he sees them rushing headlong to their own self-destruction. He feels this keenly and sharply, and weeps and laments. The book of Lamentations is made up of the cries of his heart, as he senses all that is happening to him. Jeremiah was a very sensitive young man, and a very sensitive prophet.

But God's answer to him is what it has been to every other young man who felt this way: "Go, for I am with you. Don't worry about your voice, your looks, your personality, your ability -- I will be with you. I will be your voice. I'll speak through you, give you the words. I'll give you the power to stand. I'll give you the courage. I'll be your wisdom. I'll be whatever you need. Whatever demand is made upon you, I'll be there to meet it."

You and I recognize that this, essentially, is the New Covenant that Jesus makes with all of us. This is what he promises each one of us -- that he will be with us in this same way. The promise which encouraged Jeremiah is the same promise which is handed out to you and to me in the gospel -- that whatever we are, whatever demand is made upon us, "Do not be afraid. Do not shrink back. Do not say, 'I can't do that.'" Remember that God says, "I will be with you, and I will make you able to do it."

And so, in the third division of this call, the power of God is promised:

**Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." {Jer 1:9-10 RSV}**

As with Isaiah, God touched Jeremiah's mouth. Isaiah started this same way. God touched his mouth with the coals from the altar and gave him power in speaking. Jeremiah's words, then, become the key to his power, for it is the living, burning, shattering, building, mighty power of the word of God. Jeremiah was set over nations and kingdoms.

This was no mere poetry. Actually the messages of this book were addressed to all the great nations of the world of that day -- to Egypt, to Assyria, even to Babylon in its towering might and strength. Jeremiah was given a word for all these nations. I like to think of this scene, because I think it is repeated in every generation. Here are the nations of the world, with their obvious display of power and pomp and circumstance, with statesmen and leaders who are well-known household names, marching up and down, threatening one another, rattling their sabers, acting so proud and assertive in themselves. But God picks out an obscure young man, a youth thirty years of age whom no one has ever heard of, from a tiny little town in a

small, obscure country, and says to him, "Look, I have set you over all the nations and kingdoms of the earth. Your word, because it is my word, will have more power than all the power of the nations."

That is a remarkable description of what is our heritage as Christians in Jesus Christ. James says that the prayer of a righteous man releases great power. And when you and I pray about the affairs of life we can turn the course of nations, as the word of Jeremiah altered the destiny of the nations of his day. When we preach and proclaim the truth of God, even though we are obscure and no one knows who we are, that word has power to change the course of nations. This could be documented throughout the course of history.

So Jeremiah was set in the midst of death and destruction, but God said he would plant a hope and a healing. His word was to "pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow" -- and that is always the work of God. In a nation there are many things which have to be torn down -- things which men trust in -- just as in an individual's heart and life there are things which need to be destroyed.

I talked with a young man not long ago about his marriage. He said to me, "I don't understand what's wrong with my marriage. I'm doing everything that I know to do, but our relationship isn't right. I can't put my finger on what is wrong." I said to him, "Yes, I'm sure there is something wrong, and God will show it to you. There are things you're doing in your marriage which you're not aware of, things you need to see. But right now you are blinded to them. You think things are right, and yet they're not, and it puzzles you. All this indicates is that there are still things God needs to tear down -- points of pride, moments of discourtesy, perhaps, that you don't recognize, habits and reactions of worry and anxiety and anger and frustration that you've fallen into or given way to, and you don't even know about them." We all have areas like these in our lives. And the work of God is to open our eyes to these things, to destroy them and root them out -- and then, always, to build and to plant. God never destroys for the purpose of destroying; he destroys in order that he might build up again. This was God's call to Jeremiah.

The closing section of this chapter depicts the ministry of this young man in the land. It falls into three major divisions, beginning with Verse 11. First there are certain symbols of what would be accomplished through this young man's ministry:

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a rod of almond [i.e., a branch of the almond tree]." Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it." {Jer 1:11-12 RSV}

There is a little play on words here, in the Hebrew. The Jews called the almond tree "the watcher" (*shaqed*) because it was the first tree to blossom in the spring. They saw it as watching for the return of the sun and the warming of the earth, and therefore the first to herald the coming of springtime. And God said to Jeremiah, "You have seen well, for that is what I am doing; I am watching (*shoqed*) over my word to perform it." This is a picture of health and healing. Throughout this prophecy there are wonderful passages which deal with the way God was planning to heal this land. Jeremiah was sent to buy a piece of property while the city was being taken by the enemy. In the midst of all this destruction he was to buy this property, get the title deed, and have it sealed and witnessed, as a testimony to the fact that God intended to restore the land, and that property would be of value yet. This is what God does in our lives.

There is another symbol:

The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north." Then the Lord said to me, "Out of the north evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land. For, lo, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls round about, and against all the cities of Judah." {Jer 1:13-15 RSV}

He saw a pot boiling, with smoke and steam rising up, driven streaming by the north wind to the south. God said, "Jeremiah, that is what I'm going to do. I'm going to bring a boiling pot of nations, a confederation of nations down from the north against this city of Jerusalem [as once again he is going to do this in history --

perhaps very soon], and the city shall be taken, its people driven into exile, and my judgment shall fall upon this land." This was the picture of judgment. And it was to come from the north. Egypt was the greatest power on earth at this time, but Egypt is ignored here. God seizes upon Babylon as the source from which judgment would come.

Then, second, he announces the cause of that judgment, Verse 16:

**"And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have burned incense to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands."
{Jer 1:16 RSV}**

That is the reason why a nation dies. It forsakes its God, and evidences it by doing two things: by burning incense before other gods, i.e., by exalting ideas and philosophies which represent the various controlling passions and imaginations of men; and, by worshipping the works of their own hands, i.e., by exalting man, pointing to man as the solution to his own problems -- in other words, the rise of humanism. These are the signs of decay in a nation. This is what was happening in Israel. In the very first prophecy of Jeremiah to Judah, Chapter 2, Verse 13, he says,

**"... for my people have committed two evils;
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns,
that can hold no water." {Jer 2:13 RSV}**

What a picture! Here is a valley with a stream running through it, a beautiful mountain stream with clear, cool, clean water. The people have been drinking from that water, but then they forsake it. And up on the hillsides, the barren, rocky hillsides, they hew out cisterns to catch the water as it runs off down the mountainside with its dirt and its leaves and its collection of bugs and dead mice. The cisterns leak. They do not hold the water. So, at great expense, the people are constantly building cisterns which break in the drought and let the water run out. And they are left with nothing to drink, while the stream of living water runs fresh in the valley below.

What a picture that is!

A lot of people do that, do they not? They turn from the God who is able to bring the freshness and vitality of joy and peace and love into a life, and start seeking it in all kinds of dead human philosophy, in failing friendships, in momentary pleasures -- these broken cisterns that can hold no water. This is when a nation, a home, an individual, begins to die.

And in the midst of it, the final promise to Jeremiah is,

"But you, gird up your loins; arise, and say to them everything I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you." {Jer 1:17-19 RSV}

I remember that when I was a boy in high school, sixteen years old, I was arrested once -- served a warrant because it was alleged, wrongly, it was proved, that I had been hunting out of season. I remember yet how fearsome it was to receive that warrant for my arrest, to open it up and read these words: "The People of the State of Montana versus Ray C. Stedman." I thought, "What unfair odds! The whole population of the state of Montana against me!"

That is what this prophet Jeremiah had to face. All the people of the land, and its kings and priests, would all be against him. But God said, "Don't you worry, you shall stand. I'll make you a stone, an iron, and a bronze

against them. Nothing will shake you." And the amazing thing is that though this young man was thrown into prison, put in a dungeon where he was mired in the mud, put on a bread-and-water diet, though he was ostracized and isolated, set aside, rejected and insulted, and finally exiled into Egypt, never once when God asked him to speak did he ever fail to say the thing God told him to say. What remarkable courage this young man exhibited!

Yet, through all of it, he learned four things:

1. He learned the sovereignty of God, his control over the nations of earth.
2. He learned the ruthlessness of God, whose judgments would be unmerciful against his people who persisted in turning away from him.
3. He learned the faithfulness of God always to fulfill his word, no matter what was said.
4. And, finally, he learned to suffer with the heart of God, the tenderness of God.

This man suffered, he wept. He lost hope for a while and cried out, "O that I had never been born!" He felt the awful hurt of his people, and wept over them. But through it all he realized that he was but feeling the suffering of the heart of God over people who turn him aside, and the tenderness of God that draws them back at last, despite all their wandering. That is the prophecy of Jeremiah. I hope we will enjoy it as we go through it together, and learn much for the hour of our own national peril.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we will find the secret of the courage of this young man to stand in the day of national danger and disaster, and to be faithful to our calling. Help us to learn, Lord, how to do this. Thank you for the preparation you have given us through the generations who have gone before us. And now, Lord, may we pass this on to the generations who follow, that they may stand and be faithful. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness, we pray, Amen.

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