

THE LORD AND HIS WORKMAN

by Ray C. Stedman

I want to begin this study in the prophecy of Jeremiah by quoting an advertisement I saw this past week in Dallas, Texas, because it touches upon the preparation needed by God's man in God's age:

Wanted: A minister for a growing church -- a real challenge for the right man. Opportunity to become better acquainted with people. Applicant must offer experience as shop worker, office manager, educator (all levels, including college), artist, salesman, diplomat, writer, theologian, politician, Boy Scout leader, children's worker, minor league athlete, psychologist, vocational counselor, psychiatrist, funeral director, wedding consultant, master of ceremonies, circus clown, missionary, and social worker. Helpful but not essential: experience as a butcher, baker, cowboy, and Western Union messenger. Must know all about the problems of birth, marriage, and death; must also be conversant with latest theories and practices in areas like pediatrics, economics, and nuclear science. Right man will hold firm views on every topic, but is careful not to upset people who disagree. Must be forthright but flexible. Returns criticism and backbiting with Christian love and forgiveness. Should have outgoing, friendly disposition at all times. Should be a captivating speaker and intent listener. Will pretend he enjoys hearing women talk. Directly responsible for views and conduct to all church members and visitors; not confined to direction or support from any one person. Salary not commensurate with experience or need. No overtime pay. All replies kept confidential. Anyone applying will undergo full investigation to determine his sanity.

That perhaps is what is demanded in the ministry today! But we ought to set that against the biblical truth which is rapidly coming back into focus -- that all of us are in the ministry. All God's people are ministers, wherever they are. According to the gifts God has given you, you are a minister, and in the ministry. As we come to this study of Jeremiah, we are looking at the story of the last days of the nation of Judah -- the death of a nation. There are a great many lessons to learn from what happened to Judah. But perhaps the central lesson of this book is what happened to Jeremiah as God prepared him to minister in a day of decay. He was called to a strange and difficult ministry. God gradually had to prepare him and toughen him increasingly for the assignments he was to be given in this nation. As we saw last time, Jeremiah struggled with his commission. He wept over it, pleaded with God for this people. And the more he wept and pleaded, the harder God seemed to grow, and the more adamant and determined to judge.

In the passage we will examine today it is now thirteen years later in Jeremiah's life than in our previous study. We have come to the time when King Josiah has died. Josiah was a godly king, the last godly king in Judah. He had made a valiant effort to try to reform the nation, to overcome its idol worship and to restore the worship of Jehovah. Outwardly the people had gone along with him, but inwardly there was still deep-seated rebellion and revolt. At last, as recounted in Second Chronicles 35, Josiah met his death when, disobeying the word of God, he went out to do battle with the king of Egypt, Neco, who was on his way to the battle of Carchemish, one of the great battles of all time. There on the plain of Megiddo, where the last battle of all the ages will be fought, the battle of Armageddon, king Josiah met his death. He was mourned in Israel, and Jeremiah the prophet made a lamentation for him which is recorded in the book of Lamentations.

So Jeremiah was plunged into an even more difficult time than he had ever known before. The young son of Josiah, Jehoahaz, came to the throne. But he was a very weak king and within three months had been deposed by the king of Egypt, and his brother, Jehoiakim, was placed on the throne. This was a troubled time in the nation. Around it the great powers of earth, the superpowers of that day, were vying and contending with one another for supremacy in the affairs of the world. Egypt was on its way down, Assyria was melting away, the might of Babylon was looming on the horizon. It was a world of unrest and great turmoil. In between was Judah, caught in the jaws of a nutcracker, situated between the great empires of that day.

In Chapter 11, where we begin today, God sends young Jeremiah back to the nation with another word of warning and denunciation. We will not take time to read it, because it is very similar to other messages which Jeremiah had to deliver repeatedly to these people -- a warning that God would not allow them to get away

with their unbelief, their revolt, their violence, and their worship of other gods, and that he was determined to judge them. Once again in this account, in Verse 14, for the third time now in Jeremiah's ministry, God tells him not to pray for this nation:

"Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble." {Jer 11:14 RSV}

This was what had distressed Jeremiah so much in our last study together -- that God would not even let him pray for them. He had laid a vocal quarantine on Jeremiah, had said, "I do not want you to pray, for prayer delays judgment." All this had great effect upon Jeremiah. What we are going to see now is God's toughening of this young man in preparation for what was coming. Jeremiah was moved and distressed by God's failure to listen to him, but what was worse, this account tells us, was that when he went home to the little town of Anathoth, a tiny suburb just outside the city limits of Jerusalem, Jeremiah found something happening which absolutely threw him into consternation. He learned that there was a plot against his life by his own neighbors and friends. He tells us about it, beginning in Verse 18:

**The Lord made it known to me and I knew;
then thou didst show me their evil deeds.
But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. {Jer 11:18-19a RSV}**

He suddenly realizes how naive and blind he had been to trust these neighbors and friends. Now they had plotted against his life.

**I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying,
"Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
that his name be remembered no more." {Jer 11:19b RSV}**

Jeremiah was dismayed that his friends would refuse to support him and would betray him in this way. He comes to the Lord and cries out,

**But, O Lord of hosts, who judgest righteously,
who triest the heart and the mind,
let me see thy vengeance upon them,
for to thee I have committed my cause. {Jer 11:20 RSV}**

He did the right thing. He brought his problem to the Lord. Some of us do not bother to do that when a trial strikes. We run to somebody else. But he brought it to the Lord. Yet he was a thorough-going evangelical, for, though he brought his problem to the Lord, he had with it also a complete plan for how God ought to solve it! He wanted God to wreak vengeance upon these who were threatening him, and he expected God to do it. But the Lord told him,

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the men of Anathoth, who seek your life, and say, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hand" -- therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: "Behold, I will punish them; the young men shall die by the sword; their sons and their daughters shall die by famine; and none of them shall be left. For I will bring evil upon the men of Anathoth, the year of their punishment." {Jer 11:21-23 RSV}

God says to Jeremiah, "You're right; I will punish these men, but I will do it in my time. They are going to have a part in the judgment which is coming upon Judah. They shall suffer in the famine and in the attack coming from Babylon, but it will be when I say." That is one of the difficult things about dealing with God, is it not? He has his own time schedule. We want him to act now. We say, "Lord, look at the opportunity you've got! It's all set up. And if you'd just do this now, everything would work out." But God ignores us, says, "I'll do it in my own time." That was one of the hard things Jeremiah had to learn, as it is with every one of us. God does not move on our time schedule, much as we would like him to. In Chapter 12 Jeremiah goes on to present his case before the Lord:

Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I complain to thee; {Jer 12:1a RSV}

"I know that what you are doing is right, Lord. I know that you cannot do wrong." This, by the way, is a great lesson to learn, for we are sometimes tempted to say, "God is not right; he's wrong!" Jeremiah began the right way. And yet there were great and vexing questions which came up into his troubled heart, and he shares them:

**Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all who are treacherous thrive? {Jer 12:1c RSV}**

And:

**How long will the land mourn,
and the grass of every field wither? {Jer 12:4a RSV}**

He cries out to God with these troubled questions in his mind. As you recognize, those are the standard questions men ask when things begin to go wrong in an individual life, or in the life of a community, or a nation. I was in Fort Worth this past week teaching a Bible class in a large home there. There were a lot of Young Life kids there, and I noticed that they seemed rather sober, far more so than usual. I asked what was wrong, and found out that Fort Worth was going through a predicament similar to ours here in the kidnapping of Patricia Hearst, daughter of the newspaper publisher. A very well-known and well-liked high school girl in that city had disappeared mysteriously a few days before, and no one knew where she was. All her high school friends were praying for her. She was a Christian, and they were sure that God would protect her.

Just an hour before the class met that night, word had come over the radio that her body had been found. She had been sexually abused and killed. These young people were stunned, and they were asking this same question: "Why? If there's a God of love and power, why couldn't he have done something about it? If he is a God of power, he could act. If he is a God of love, he would want to act. Why does he sit there and let things like this happen?" That is one of the great questions thrown at our faith again and again in this day and age. This is what Jeremiah was crying out to God about. Notice God's response. It is very interesting. Verse 5 of Chapter 12:

**"If you have raced with men on foot,
and they have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?
And if in a safe land you fall down,
how will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?" {Jer 12:5 RSV}**

In other words, "Jeremiah, what are you going to do when it gets worse? If these kinds of things throw you, if your faith is challenged and you are upset and you cry out to me and ask these questions, what are you going to do when it gets very much worse? Then where are you going to turn? What are you going to stand on then? If you have been running with the men on foot and have gotten tired then, what are you going to do when you have to run against horses? And if in running through the open prairie you fall down, what are you going to do when you have to struggle through a hot, sweaty jungle, whose thick growth impedes your progress in every way?" These are searching questions, are they not?

We learned some chilling things last week in Dallas, Texas, in listening to Hal Lindsey and Ed Plowman. Hal, as most of you know, is the author of several best-selling books. Ed is one of the editors of Christianity Today, and he gave a very remarkable report on some things which are happening in the world right in our own day. And Hal gave a very frightening report on the rise of the occult, and the way demonism and satanism are moving into every level of life in our country today. They talked about famines which are already beginning, just as the "prophets of gloom and doom", as they were called a few years ago, had predicted. Already a great famine is raging across the central part of Africa, as the Sahara Desert, for no reason known to man, steadily moves southward at the rate of eleven miles a year. Thousands of people are starving to death in the Sudan right now. These strange things are happening in our world. They talked about how Jesus had said that, as we neared the end, there would come earthquakes and famines and wars, with nation rising up against nation, and frightening things in the sea -- the roaring of the waves -- would make men afraid. And he called

all this "the beginnings of sorrow", merely the beginnings of sorrow. "Now, if faith grows cold and faint and weak in the midst of the pressures of today," God's question to Jeremiah, and to us, is, "what are you going to do when it gets worse? How will you compete with horses, when you give in against men on foot?"

Well, Jeremiah expected God to lift the burden. I think most of us are due for a shock in our Christian lives when we reach that stage in Christian development in which we expect God constantly to work out our problems on easy terms...and then one day he doesn't do it! That is always a shocking time to us, but that is where Jeremiah is right now. God does not say, "Don't worry, Jeremiah, I'll work out your problems. I'll take care of everything. You won't have any more strain. Go right back to work." He says, "Jeremiah, it's going to get worse, a lot worse; what are you going to do then?" Then he begins to detail some of the things in store for him. In fact, he begins with one of the first things Jeremiah was to find when he got home. "If you were disturbed by the fact that your friends and neighbors had betrayed you and were plotting against your life," God says, "just wait!" Verse 6:

**"For even your brothers and the house of your father,
even they have dealt treacherously with you;
they are in full cry after you;
believe them not,
though they speak fair words to you." {Jer 12:6 RSV}**

"Jeremiah, your own family is part of the plot." What do you think that did to Jeremiah, when God said this to him? Furthermore, God went on to point out that judgment was absolutely inevitable for this nation. Nothing Jeremiah could do would stop it. In Verses 7-8, God says,

**"I have forsaken my house,
I have abandoned my heritage;
I have given the beloved of my soul
into the hands of her enemies.
My heritage has become to me
like a lion in the forest,
she has lifted up her voice against me;
therefore I hate her." {Jer 12:7-8 RSV}**

Now, that is God speaking! "I hate her!" What does it do to your theology when the God of love says, "I hate her -- the beloved of my soul, I hate her." What kind of confusing contrast is this? I know you have to set this against what theologians call the "anthropomorphisms" of Scripture, i.e., God's speaking in terms of man, as though he were a man. For it is true that the inherent nature of God is love, and he can never be anything but a God of love. And yet, love can be so offended and rejected that it acts as though it hates. That is what Jeremiah was facing here. God goes on to describe what he is going to do in the land, and how he will deliver it to judgment. But there is a word of hope, a ray of light in Verses 14-15:

**Thus says the Lord concerning all my evil neighbors who touch the heritage which I
have given my people Israel to inherit: "Behold, I will pluck them up from their land,
and I will pluck up the house of Judah from among them. And after I have plucked them
up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again each to his
heritage and each to his land." {Jer 12:14-15 RSV}**

The final message of God is not one of hate; it is always one of love, one of compassion. But in between there are strange actions of God, and we have to face the fact that God sometimes does things we cannot understand at the moment at all. This is one of the great, challenging issues of the Christian faith. One of the great tests of our faith is when we reach that day when we can no longer understand what God is doing, when it does not seem to be in line with his promises at all. And we have to stand amazed like Paul and say, "Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" {Rom 11:34 RSV}. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out!" {Rom 11:33 RSV}.

Well, God is not through with Jeremiah, and in the next chapter we find one of those amazing visual aids

which God employs to teach this young prophet a great and marvelous truth. I never get over being astonished at the objects God uses in teaching lessons! For here, in Chapter 13, Jeremiah is given a sign, and we have to call it "the sign of the dirty shorts" -- really! For, believe it or not, he says,

Thus said the Lord to me, "Go and buy a linen waistcloth, and put it on your loins [that is nothing more nor less than a pair of linen shorts], and do not dip it in water." {Jer 13:1 RSV}

If any of you men have been buying underwear recently you know that you always look for the wash-and-wear variety -- at least I do. But here God says, "You wear it, but don't wash it." He expected Jeremiah to buy a new pair of linen shorts, to put them on, but not to wash them. He was teaching him something from this. What in the world would God be teaching by this? If you skip ahead to Verse 11 for a moment, you will see what he is after:

"For as the waistcloth clings to the loins of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, " says the Lord, "that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen." {Jer 13:11 RSV}

In other words, God chose them, designed them, for intimacy. A pair of shorts is the most intimate garment a man can wear. God uses that as a wonderful figure here to instruct us that this is what he had designed his people for -- to be as intimate to him as a pair of shorts would be to a man. I remember the advertisement of an underwear company a number of years ago -- you do not see it very often anymore. It said, "Next to yourself, you'll love BVD's." That is what God is saying here. Next to himself, closest to himself, in the most intimate relationship possible, he wants his people -- in order that they might be a people, a name, a praise, a glory, unto him, a people for his name. And so he is teaching Jeremiah what his people meant to him, and what he had designed for them, and the glory which was possible to them in the intimacy of a relationship with God. But now Jeremiah was sent to do something with these shorts. We read, in Verses 2-4:

So I bought a waistcloth according to the word of the Lord, and put it on my loins. [We do not know how long he wore it, but it evidently got quite dirty, because he was forbidden to wash it.] And the word of the Lord came to me a second time, "Take the waistcloth which you have bought, which is upon your loins, and arise, go to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock." {Jer 13:2-4 RSV}

The Euphrates River was about two hundred miles away, on the border of Babylon. God is saying something here about the nation which would come to bring judgment upon this people. Jeremiah had to journey two hundred miles to the Euphrates River wearing his dirty shorts, hide them in the cleft of a rock, leave them there, and retrace the two hundred miles to Judah. Then he tells us, in Verses 6-7,

And after many days the Lord said to me, "Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the waistcloth which I commanded you to hide there. " Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the waistcloth from the place where I had hidden it. And behold, the waistcloth was spoiled; it was good for nothing. {Jer 13:6-7 RSV}

You can imagine the shape it was in. It was already soiled and dirty when Jeremiah had hidden it there. Exposed to the elements -- the rain, the wind, the sun -- the cloth would rot and shred. Finally, when Jeremiah came back and dug it out of the cleft of the rock, it was dirty, rotten, shredding, hardly able to hold together, worthless. Standing there with those worthless shorts in his hand, he tells us, in Verses 8-10,

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Thus says the Lord: Even so will I spoil the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this waistcloth, which is good for nothing." {Jer 13:8-10 RSV}

Jeremiah was taught what happens to a life, how it begins to rot when it turns away from God. It cannot be sustained in its strength, for God is the source of all strength in humanity. Man cannot be man apart from God.

Any individual, or any nation, that refuses to live on this basis, will find his life beginning to rot and to shred, and to lose its consistency and power. He will be as this waistcloth -- good for nothing. The rest of the chapter goes on to show how moved and stirred Jeremiah is by this. He pleads with the people, in Verses 15-17,

**Hear and give ear; be not proud,
for the Lord has spoken.
Give glory to the Lord your God
before he brings darkness,
before your feet stumble
on the twilight mountains,
and while you look for light
he turns it into gloom
and makes it deep darkness.
But if you will not listen,
my soul will weep in secret for your pride;
my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears,
because the Lord 's flock has been taken captive. {Jer 13:15-17 RSV}**

Do you see the effect upon Jeremiah of his own ministry? Then, to make it worse, God sends a severe drought upon the land. Chapter 14 opens with that:

The word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah concerning the drought: {Jer 14:2 RSV}

He goes on to describe the land, how the cisterns have no water, the ground is dismayed, there is no rain on the land, the crops are dried up, and wild asses stand and pant, and there is no water in all of the land. This is part of the judging hand of God. Once again this arouses questions in Jeremiah's heart. He asks, Verse 7,

**"Though our iniquities testify against us,
act, O Lord, for thy name's sake;" {Jer14:7 RSV}**

Do you see what he is saying? "I understand that you have to judge this people because of their wickedness, Lord, but what about you? You're the healer, you're the God who can restore wicked people. For your name's sake, do this."

**"for our backslidings are many,
we have sinned against thee.
O thou hope of Israel,
its savior in time of trouble,
Why shouldst thou be like a stranger in the land,
like a wayfarer who turns aside to tarry for a night?
Why shouldst thou be like a man confused,
like a mighty man who cannot save?
Yet thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us,
and we are called by thy name;
leave us not." {Jer 14:6b-9 RSV}**

Have you ever come to that place? Many a man of God, in the record of the Scriptures, has turned away the judging hand of God by pleading the glory of God himself. Moses had, Samuel had, and others had stood before God and said, "Regardless of what we're like, God, remember what you're like. Surely, for your own name's sake you won't let this thing happen, lest your name be defiled among the nations." And this is Jeremiah's cry. Now, that is great praying. Jeremiah is reaching out to God on the highest level of prayer possible. He calls to God in these terms, and he closes the chapter with an eloquent plea to God. Consider these words, beginning with Verse 19:

**Hast thou utterly rejected Judah?
Dost thy soul loathe Zion?
Why hast thou smitten us
so that there is no healing for us?
We looked for peace, but no good came;**

for a time of healing, but behold, terror.
We acknowledge our wickedness, O Lord,
and the iniquity of our fathers,
for we have sinned against thee.
Do not spurn us, for thy name's sake;
do not dishonor thy glorious throne;
remember and do not break thy covenant with us.
Are there any among the false gods of the nations that can bring rain?
Or can the heavens give showers?
Art thou not he, O Lord our God?
We set our hope on thee,
for thou doest all these things. {Jer 14:19-22 RSV}

That is great praying, is it not? But look at God's answer:

Then the Lord said to me, "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go! And when they ask you, 'Where shall we go?' you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord: "Those who are for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are for the sword, to the sword; those who are for famine, to famine, and those who are for captivity, to captivity."'" {Jer 15:1-2 RSV}

God does not budge an inch. Now, what are you going to do with a God like that? When God gets that immovable, it is a great threat to faith. What do you do? Well, God is not yet through with Jeremiah. Though he seems to be adamant and harsh and unyielding, and goes on to repeat his threats to the nation and refuses to be moved, he has something yet to say. Chapter 15 closes with Jeremiah finally praying for himself. He has been forbidden to pray for the people, and so he cries out for himself, beginning in Verse 15:

O Lord, thou knowest;
remember me and visit me,
and take vengeance for me on my persecutors.
In thy forbearance take me not away;
know that for thy sake I bear reproach. {Jer 15:15 RSV}

Then he thinks back to Josiah's day, when the word of God was found in the temple and he says,

Thy words were found, and I ate them,
and thy words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I am called by thy name,
O Lord, God of hosts. {Jer 15:16 RSV}

But he is wretched, hurt, and despairing, and he cries out in Verse 18,

Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail? {Jer 15:18 RSV}

Those are the words of a man about to lose his faith entirely. He says that God just seems to pay no attention, to give no heed, to turn a deaf ear. "I cry out to him, and I'm on the very verge of wondering if God himself is a liar, and that he will prove false in the end." Have you been to that stage yet? Have you ever done that? That is a great test of faith. One of these days, if you have not yet done so, you may be standing where Jeremiah stood. But now notice how tenderly and gently God deals with him:

Therefore thus says the Lord:
"If you return, I will restore you,

and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.
And I shall make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you, says the Lord.
I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless." {Jer 15:19-21 RSV}

God answers his own questions here. He had asked Jeremiah, "What will you do, if you've been wearied by running with the men on foot, when you contend with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, what will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?" Now his answer is, "Jeremiah, even in those hours when everything else seems to be collapsing, and nothing seems to be dependable, if in that hour you will rest on me, you will find that I will strengthen you and see you through. I am the only adequate source of strength in any time of trouble. Any other source will fail you. The arm of flesh will fail. But [as we sing in the old hymn],

When through the deep waters I call you to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow...
When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,
my grace all sufficient shall be your supply...

"I'll never, never leave you," is God's promise. And the promise is to us in this day, as well. So God pours on the pressure sometimes, as you see with Jeremiah, not to destroy us, but to toughen us, to make us ready for what is coming. And I think that this is just such an hour in America today. Trials such as this nation has never faced lie before us -- shortages, famines, burdens -- problems we have never known as a people lie ahead of us. And surely nothing is adequate to meet them but the strength of a living God.

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