

The Whole Prophecy of Jeremiah

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Behold I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, against its princes, against its priests, and against 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” (Jeremiah 1:18-19, and 15:20).

There are 52 chapters in the prophecies of Jeremiah, covering nearly 60 pages of the Word. Yet apart from a few striking quotations most of us know very little about this important work. Who was this prophet, anyway? What was the context of his ministry in ancient Israel and what vital things can we learn from his work that might apply to our lives today?

He is referred to as one of the Major Prophets (as distinct from the Minor ones), not because he was more important than others but simply because his is one of the 4 longest prophetic books, along with Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. As you may know there are three classes of the prophets, those who prophesied before the captivity in Babylon, those who did so during the captivity, and those who did so after the return to Israel. Jeremiah is the last of the first group, known as the pre-exilic prophets, whose very challenging task was to prepare the people of Judah, and Jerusalem specifically, to accept the consequences of their idolatry and submit to the Babylonians, who had been appointed by the Lord to administer this punishment.

It was a tough assignment, which is why Jeremiah needed so much encouragement to take it on, as you heard in the first lesson. And in the course of the work you can really sympathize not only with him but with the Jews in general as they resisted his proclamations, believing that they were *right* to stay and defend their land rather than giving in to an invading army. After all, he was telling them to simply *give up*, and submit to their enemies! Why should they believe him? Why would they do this if by *any* chance they could hold out, or find some other ally – like Egypt – to help them?

Jeremiah lived and worked in the period of the last 5 kings of Judah, about a hundred years after the fall of Israel (the northern tribes) to Assyria. You can read about this period in the 2nd book of Kings, from chapter 22 to the end, but curiously there is *no mention of Jeremiah* in that book; his prophecies are all reserved for his own book.

Josiah was the first king mentioned in Jeremiah, and he was anointed when he was only 8 years old but he was a *good* king, instituting many reforms in Judah, and he reigned for over 30 years (2 K. 22:1). Unfortunately his son and successor, Jehoahaz, was *not good* and only lasted 3 months, until the Pharaoh of Egypt took him captive and replaced him with another son of Josiah whom he called Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim served the Pharaoh very well, giving him all the gold and silver he wanted from Jerusalem over an 11 year period, until the Lord had seen enough, sending bands of Syrians, Chaldeans, Moabites and others to take Judah back from Egypt and destroy it. So Jehoiakim was killed and replaced by Jehoiakin, his son, who again “did evil in the sight of the Lord” and reigned only 3 months. Then Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, appointed a member of his own family, whom he called Zedekiah, to rule in Judah. Of course Zedekiah began as a loyal puppet of Nebuchadnezzar, but after some 9 years he got cocky and rebelled. Ac-

According to Jeremiah he fell under the influence of wicked Jewish leaders who thought they could proclaim their independence. But they were no match for the Babylonians, and after a nearly 2 year siege of Jerusalem the city fell, and all the wealth, the wealthy and the well-educated of the land were carried away to serve the people of Babylon, where they remained for 70 years until Darius, the Persian king, liberated them and let them go home.

You may find all this challenging to follow, but it sets the stage for what Jeremiah was all about, and what it means for us today.

The first thing to note is summarized neatly in just three verses from chapter 2, where we read concerning Israel,

“Have you not brought this on yourself, in that you have forsaken the Lord your God when He led you in the way? And now why take the road to Egypt, to drink the waters of Sihor? Or why take the road to Assyria, to drink the waters of the River? **Your own wickedness will correct you, and your backslidings will rebuke you.** Know therefore and see that it is an evil and bitter thing that you have forsaken the Lord your God, and the fear of Me is not in you,’ says the Lord God of hosts” (Jer. 2:17-19).

The point is that the evils – mainly idolatry and associated perversions – that the people were engaged in precipitated their oppression to such an extent that *the nations who represented these very evils* were the ones that oppressed them. And the message of Jeremiah was clear and consistent: to put it in common terms, “You have brought this on yourselves, now you have to live with the consequences! (see 7:19). So just settle down, humble yourselves and accept your punishment. It may be that when you learn your lesson you can be restored to your land. In any case, whatever you do, don’t trust in your enemies to save you!”

Jeremiah is often referred to as “the weeping prophet,” because he was so obviously affected by the corruption he was sent to address, and so full of grief and pity for his people. Even so, throughout his litany of denunciations – sometimes called “Jeremiads” – he never failed to offer Israel hope if they would reform. For example, in chapter 3 we read,

“Return, backsliding Israel,’ says the Lord, and I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,’ says the Lord; I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God, and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice,’ says the Lord.

“Return, O backsliding children,’ says the Lord; ‘for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (vv. 12-15).

Here and in similar verses (see 23:3) we are introduced to the concept of the remnant, that is, of those who would remain true to the worship of the Lord through the period of exile or captivity, and this is the basis for what we in the New Church call “remains,” or “the doctrine of remains,” which is about the “remnant” of what is good and true stored up in the interiors of our minds while we are going through periods of struggle or temptation.

A regular theme throughout Jeremiah is his denunciation of harlotry and adultery, which no doubt were part and parcel of their worship of false gods. But in fact this accusation mainly draws on that quotation from chapter 3, namely, that the *marriage relationship* between the Lord and Israel was constantly being broken by their worship of “other gods.” Indeed, we read in several places that it was useless even to pray for them (11:14); they were so committed to their evils that the Lord *could not hear their prayers* (14:12).

And of course it wasn’t just the kings who were involved in this corruption, because, as it says,

“...from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely. They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down,’ says the Lord” (Jer. 6:13-15).

So the kings really only represented the people who willingly served them – as is still generally so in our world today! – Which brings us back to the question, how does all this relate to us here, now? Surely we have the truth; we know the Lord and we worship Him alone – don’t we? What need do we have for a Jeremiah in the New Church?

Well, where shall we start?

The truth is that Babylon represents something that exists inwardly in every person, New Church or otherwise. And that something is the love of self, and specifically the love of controlling or dominating over other people from the love of self. Judah represents the human will which is created to receive the love of God and manifest that love in the life of charity toward the neighbor.¹ And the kings represent the ruling principles in that will. But of course this is all subject to corruption, and when it is corrupted it leads to every kind of arrogance and conceit. More particularly, it destroys the marriage relationship between what is good and what is true in ourselves, since we then *use* the truth to support and defend our evils, or we use what is good to promote some falsity. Either way this breaks our covenant with the Lord and constitutes a form of spiritual whoredom or adultery.

Now these are strong words, and we need to take them seriously. The Lord didn’t give us 60 pages of His Word just to remind us of some ancient Jewish perversions. Rather every page, every chapter is full of deep symbolism that speaks to the issues we have to deal with every day. And the scariest part is that just as the people of Judah turned against Jeremiah in denial and defensiveness, so our own pride and willfulness turn us against the truth when someone calls our faults to our attention.

For example, like the people of Judah we in the church can get completely caught up in our own ideas or the ideas of so-called experts, really believing that these are better or more practical than

¹ The 10 tribes of Israel, as distinct from Judah, represent the human understanding. Once this has been corrupted by falsities and ratiocinations, resulting symbolically in the earlier subjugation of Israel by Assyria, the will is left vulnerable and virtually defenseless.

any new insight we might get from the Word. The result is a form of idolatry – thinking we know what to do without consulting the Word, or worse, when we do consult, as the people did in chapters 42 and 43 of Jeremiah, rejecting the counsel because it doesn't suit us. The specific case here was the question of what to do about the Babylonian threat. Jeremiah told them not to worry, that the Lord would save them [42:11]. In any case he explicitly warned them that they *must not turn to Egypt for help*. But they couldn't believe it and so they did turn to Egypt – with tragic results.

So what does Egypt represent in our lives? – essentially the same thing it represented in the ancient world, since it was a center of learning, knowledge, science. And of course we need this! In the book of Genesis Egypt fed the children of Israel during a great famine, and even the Lord went to Egypt as a child. But what is pictured *here* is the appeal to knowledge as an argument *against the Lord's instruction*, or the use of knowledge *to defend our own self-interest*. When we use knowledge this way we pervert our whole relationship with the Lord and condemn *ourselves* to the captivity threatened by Babylon. In short the very love of self and of what is our own that resists the Lord's Word will overwhelm us and cause us to be carried away into exile from a truly spiritual life.

The book of Jeremiah contains many famous sayings, like this one from chapter 31, quoted in the story of Herod's atrocities when the Lord was born:

“Thus says the Lord: ‘a voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.’”

Or this from chapter 17:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”

Or this more hopeful one from chapter 29:

“...Thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”

Even the question, “Can a leopard change its spots?” comes from Jeremiah (13:23).

In fact, the book contains many expressions that the Lord Himself alluded to or quoted directly in the New Testament, such as the reference to “foolish people, without understanding, who have eyes but see not, who have ears, but hear not” (5:21), or the one about His temple having become a den of thieves (7:11).

Most notably, however, the prophecies of Jeremiah conclude in the last 6 chapters with the pre-

diction of judgments on all of Israel's enemies: the Egyptians, Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Syrians and others, including, finally and most dramatically, the Babylonians. These judgments are all according to the general principle that evil always brings its own punishment. So even though the Lord allows the evil of one person or people to be punished by the evil of another, the cycle always continues and the punishers also get their due. In this way the Lord makes the evil serve a use, but it never has a happy ending. It is only when we "get the message" and *repent* of our evils that things improve. This is why Jeremiah consistently told the Jews NOT to resist or fight back (something the Lord Himself also taught in *Matthew 5:39*), but rather to accept the consequences of their evils and *reform*.

King Josiah did this but his cynical son, Jehoahaz did not. And of course neither Jehoiakim nor his son, Jehoiakin did any good, as they were both appointments of the Pharaoh of Egypt – mere knowledge trying to govern rather than serve our spiritual lives. And then there was Zedekiah, an appointment from the family of Nebuchadnezzar: how can any principle of self-love and the love of dominion contribute anything to our salvation?

Yet we conclude this very sad and difficult book of prophecy with great hope and assurance! The remnant of Israel *will be restored* and returned to the Promised Land *when they acknowledge their evils and repent, and re-commit to the Lord*. And it is exactly the same today if we would enjoy a truly heavenly life, for as the prophet says,

"Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, *and I will listen to you*. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."

Amen.

Lessons: *Jeremiah 1*
 Children's Talk on Jeremiah, and prophecy generally

Matthew 5:38-48 and Arcana Caelestia 8223:2-3

A Prayer for this Service

O Lord, inspire us, we pray, with a clear understanding of our responsibilities for our own happiness and peace. Teach us through the conscience You have given every one of us to stay on a straight path of thinking and doing what is right for its own sake, and for You. But when we commit any sin, Lord, against You or against any one of our neighbors, help us to recognize and acknowledge that sin for what it is, take full responsibility, and do whatever we can to make it right.

Take away our excuses, Lord, and show us the power of real humility as we confront the evils of our own pride and selfishness, turning to You, Your love, Your wisdom and Your power to provide for our true blessings in this world and the next.

Amen