

# The Call and Mission of Jeremiah

*The life of the prophet Jeremiah reveals a wonderful example of patient continuance in well-doing. He bore great responsibilities and suffered powerful opposition as a young man. Therefore he has a wonderful reward awaiting him in the kingdom. In many ways his ministry foreshadows the experiences of the Lord Jesus Christ. With all his strivings behind him and the hopes of the Kingdom before him, he could at the end declare:*

*"It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.*

*"It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth " (Lamentations of Jeremiah 3:26-27).*

*Our aim in this lesson is to learn to be steadfast when faced with persecution and strong opposition to what God has revealed.*

## Jeremiah 1

### THE STATE OF THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH.

Jeremiah's prophetic ministrations began in the 13th year of King Josiah and continued for forty years through the reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah (Jer. 1:1-3). Though the kingdom of Judah came to its end in the 11th year of king Zedekiah, Jeremiah's work continued among the remnant left in the land even to the time of their departure into Egypt (Jer. 40:2, 4, 6; 43:7, 8).

His life was therefore set in the tragedy of those times and it is little wonder that he is known as the prophet of doom. The prophets were sent to warn of war, evil and pestilence. His times called for urgent appeals and warnings of punishment (28:7-9), for Judah was in a state of spiritual and moral depravity. All people from the highest to the lowest had set their hearts to do evil.

"I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hand of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah" (Jer. 23: 14).

It was not by choice that Jeremiah denounced his contemporaries. He was moved by his love and loyalty to Israel's God. It was not pessimism that characterized the man, but a remarkable faith, a steadfastness in the face of opposition and persecution. This is seen as he testified for God of the calamities to come.

### TWO YOUNG AND FAITHFUL COMPANIONS.

Jeremiah is introduced as "the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin" (1: 1). Anathoth was a small village four miles north of Jerusalem, given to the Levites by the tribe of Benjamin (Josh. 21:18). Apparently an important line of priests dwelt in this city, it being readily accessible to Jerusalem and the Temple where

they served. In 2 Kgs. 22:8 we learn that Hilkiah was the high priest in Josiah's reign. He may have been the father of Jeremiah. In his life Jeremiah had to appear before kings and principal men and this task would have been easier if his family was prominent.

It was in the 13th year of Josiah's reign that the word of Yahweh first came to Jeremiah. From 2Chron. 34:1-3 we can determine that Josiah was then only 21 years of age and that it was the first year of his reformation. Jeremiah was also a young man, for in Jer. 1:6 he is termed a child (Heb. "nar" = lad, servant, young man, e.g. Psalm 119:9). So in the kingdom of Judah at that time there were these two young men, living only four miles apart, and most likely known to each other because of their family backgrounds. God was providing Judah with a final opportunity to repent: Prophet and King were united in their determination to reform the nation. In the early days of the kingdom Samuel the prophet-priest had co-operated with king David (1 Chron. 9:22). Now as the end of Judah approached, a similar combination of faithful leaders was raised up.

Later none mourned the untimely death of Josiah more than Jeremiah (2 Chron. 35:25). He had lost a strong and faithful companion whose support he could count on; thereafter his bold denunciations put his life in jeopardy.

#### **KNOWN BY GOD BEFORE HIS BIRTH (Jeremiah 1:4-10).**

Jeremiah, like Josiah, was "known" to God before he was born (Jer. 1:5; 1 Kgs. 13:2). He was a vessel prepared by Yahweh: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee and I ordained (Heb. "nathan" = "gave" cf. Isa. 9:6) thee a prophet unto the nations". Jeremiah was only a young man, and the responsibility and difficulty of his calling made him protest his inadequacy, "Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child" (v.6). But God did not accept his refusal: "Say not I am a child: for thou shall go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid . . . for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD." (vv.7-8). He was like Moses, who was meek and initially shrank from the calling and responsibilities that Yahweh called him to bear (Ex. 4:10; 3:12). Yahweh put forth His hand and touched the mouth of Jeremiah and said, "Behold I have put my words in thy mouth". Like Isaiah before him and "the prophet like unto Moses" to come after him, Jeremiah was thereby prepared for his mission (Isa. 6:5-7; Deut. 18:15-18).

#### **TWO SIGNS OF ENCOURAGEMENT (Jeremiah 1:11-16).**

As God encouraged Moses with two miracles, so He now emboldened Jeremiah with two impressive visions. The first was that of the rod of an almond tree followed by the dramatic statement, "I will hasten my word to perform it". God's message is made clearer when we realize that the word "almond" (Heb. "shaged") is very similar to the word "hasten" or "watch" (Heb. "shaqad"). The almond tree is the first to blossom while all the other trees lie dormant. The time of Yahweh's judgment on the nations was rapidly approaching; He was "watching over" or "hastening" the fulfillment of His Word. Thus

the almond blossom spoke of the determination of Yahweh to carry out His Word, which Jeremiah would utter.

In the second vision a seething pot was seen with its aspect toward the north. Terrible trouble was brewing for Jerusalem and Judah. In the heat of His wrath, Yahweh had united all the kingdoms of the north under the banner of the Chaldeans and was going to pour their boiling hatred upon the people of Judah (vv. 13-16).

In this vivid way, Jeremiah was impressed with the power and urgency of the Word that God would speak through him. There was not time for delay or hesitation. "Thou therefore gird up thy loins and arise and speak unto them all that I command thee" (v.17; cf. Ezek. 3:8-9).

### **SET OVER THE NATIONS (Jeremiah 1:17-19).**

Principally Jeremiah's mission was to preach a message of coming judgment upon Judah. Warning of impending judgments was the main duty of a prophet. As Jeremiah expressed it, "the prophets that have been before me and before thee of old prophesied both against many countries, and against great kingdoms, of war and of evil, and of pestilence" (28:7-9). Yet there is much in Jeremiah's 52 chapters about the future peace and glory of Jerusalem; but this would come after judgment. "See", said God, "I have set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build and to plant" (1:10). So whilst he declared that the land would be desolate, the cities waste, and Jerusalem without an inhabitant (e.g. 4:7; 25:34-38; 26:9; 4:23-31), he also foretold the day when Jerusalem would be occupied by David's righteous Son (23:5-8; 33:15-16); when all nations would gather to it (3:17); when the two kingdoms of Israel would be reunited (3:18; 31:1); when the land would be restored and houses and cities rebuilt amidst thanksgiving and joyfulness (30:11-22; 31:2-29; 50:4-5, 19-20, 33-34). His message was therefore two-fold: negative AND positive.

Nor was his mission restricted to Judah. "Over nations and kingdoms" God appointed him, and so we find in the compass of his words that "all the kingdoms of the world, which are upon the face of the earth" are indicted for their evil and warned of judgment to come (1:10; 25:26-31). On one occasion Jeremiah sent yokes of wood to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon to symbolize their approaching servitude to the king of Babylon (27:1-8; 28:12-14). Yet chapters 50 and 51 describe the destruction of the mighty kingdom of Babylon. Before these days Jeremiah had advised the inhabitants of Jerusalem to surrender to the Chaldeans; thereby they would secure their lives. To resist, on the other hand, would result in death (21:8-9; 27:1-8). Again, he sent to those already in captivity, saying, "Pray for the peace of Babylon" (29:1-7). Without question Jeremiah's words reached the ears of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. When finally the Babylonians took Jerusalem, the princes of Babylon, on instructions from Nebuchadnezzar, searched for Jeremiah. They released him from prison and bonds, providing him with every necessity, and even a reward (39:11-14; 40:1-6)! The king of

Judah had imprisoned him and the people rejected him but the great king Nebuchadnezzar gave the decree, "Take him, and look well to him, and do him no harm; but do unto him even as he shall say unto thee" (39: 12). In such remarkable ways the prophet learned the meaning of his name, "Yahweh exalts".

### **A SUFFERING SERVANT YET FULL OF COMPASSION.**

After Josiah's death, his life was even sought by those of his own city of Anathoth (11:19); he was plotted against (18:18-23); was defamed (20: 10); reproached, derided all day long (20:7); cursed by the people as they curse those who practice usury (15:10); accused falsely (37:13-15); placed in the stocks (20:2, 3); put on trial for the Truth (26:10-24); imprisoned (32:1-2); and given over to death (37:15; 38:4-5). In all these ways he showed the pattern of Yahweh's Suffering Servant to come.

Yet Jeremiah never exalted himself above his brethren. Despite the bitterness of their opposition he prayed for them on many occasions (e.g. 10:23-25; 11 :5; 14:7-9); was moved by compassion because of their plight (4:19); and wished that his eyes were a fountain that he could weep over the coming slaughter (9:1-2; 13:17). How beautifully he fore-shadowed the spirit of the Lord "who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered he threatened not", and who instructed his disciples, "Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you" (I Pet. 2:23; Matt. 5:44).

### **AN UNCOMPROMISING MESSAGE.**

Yet this wonderful man, whose eyes wept for his people, was quite uncompromising in the message he preached. He never failed to tell them of the terrible consequences of their evil ways. The lesson for us is that love is not merely tolerance. Love is tolerant, "it suffereth long and is kind"; but when wrong is perpetuated and standards deteriorate, then love demands that we take the stand of Jeremiah. We must be concerned with eternal things and cannot idly stand by when the eternal well-being of those whom we love is endangered. It may well bring the reproaches that the faithful prophet experienced. However, "the Lord will not cast off forever, but though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies" (Lam. 3:31-32).

### **LESSONS FOR US:**

- Young men and women are wise to hearken carefully to faithful elders
- Apostasy and indifference in ecclesial life are not to be faced with dismay.
- We ought to be very thankful for companions in the Truth.
- Our sufficiency is of God by Whom we can do all things (Phil. 4:13).
- All that live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecutions.
- True love for our companions is humble and tenacious.
- Tolerance of evil is not love.