

Listening
to God in
Difficult
Times

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JEREMIAH

INTRODUCTION TO JEREMIAH



In the Old Testament, God sent His messengers, the prophets, to declare His words to His people and to other nations and their kings. The written records of their messages are filled with phrases like “the Word of the Lord came to” or “thus says the Lord” or “declares the Lord.” Often their messages pointed out disobedience that required repentance. Other times they proclaimed judgment for that disobedience, and sometimes they brought comfort. When the message called for repentance, the people sometimes listened to the message, but often they didn’t. Listening to God in difficult times can itself be difficult. Bad news is hard to receive. Reactions range from denial (“It can’t be true!”) to accusation (“You’re lying!” or “It’s their fault!”) to despair (“What will we do?”) and even to shooting the messenger, so to speak.

Jeremiah heard it all.

Some of the messages of some of the prophets are recorded in books of the Bible, such as the book of Jeremiah. The Old Testament includes four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and twelve minor prophets. The prophets can also be grouped this way: Those who prophesied before the southern kingdom’s captivity in Babylon, like Isaiah, are called *preexilic*. Those who prophesied during the captivity, like Daniel, are called *exilic*. Those who prophesied after the

return from the exile, like Malachi, are called *postexilic*. You'll soon discover for yourself when Jeremiah gave his message and whether he should be called *preexilic*, *exilic*, or *postexilic*.

As you study Jeremiah, you'll see the names of kings who reigned during the time he delivered his message, and you'll see references to various events. These clues can help you determine when Jeremiah prophesied. In the appendix of this book, we've included a chart with names and dates to help you put these kings and events in context. But you'll observe the book of Jeremiah to discover Jeremiah's message. You'll also see his emotional turmoil because unlike most prophets, he recorded how he felt while delivering his message. In fact, of all the prophets, Jeremiah is the most personally revealing.

Before you begin studying Jeremiah, let's review a little historical background about the nation of Israel. After God brought Israel out of their 400-year captivity in Egypt and into the land He promised forever to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people spent about 400 years living without an earthly king because God was their king. Then they asked for a king like the other nations, and God told the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as king. But Saul was disobedient, so God replaced him with David, with whom He made a covenant to build a dynasty. David's son Solomon succeeded him on the throne and built a temple for God in Jerusalem. But for all the wisdom God gave him, Solomon disobeyed God by turning to the idols his many wives and concubines worshipped. For this sin, in the days of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the kingdom was divided into the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah).

Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom (Israel) immediately created a false, idolatrous worship system, and all the kings of Israel followed in this idolatry, along with almost all the people. (A few went to Judah to worship in Jerusalem at the temple Solomon built, according to God's command.)

Judah fell into idolatry as well even though they had the temple and the Levitical priesthood. God sent messengers, the prophets, to both Israel and Judah but with little result. A few of the kings of Judah responded in obedience. Most did not. Usually, neither the kings nor the people listened to God. By the time Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry, the northern kingdom (Israel) had been taken captive by the Assyrians, they were scattered in a variety of cities and lands, and the territory they had lived in was filled with people from other nations that Assyria brought there. Their descendants included the Samaritans of Jesus' day. God took Israel out of the land He promised them in judgment for their idolatry. Judah watched, but would they learn? Almost 100 years later, God sent Jeremiah with a message. Would the people listen to God this time?

I KNEW YOU BEFORE I FORMED YOU



The start of the book of Jeremiah tells us much about the prophet. We learn about his hometown, his father, and his heritage. We also learn about his relationship with God, which guided his ministry. That's the way it works with us too. Our relationship with God is the most important element of our ministry, or our role in the body of Christ. As you study Jeremiah's message, study the man. Learn from him because God might call you to a ministry like Jeremiah's in your day, declaring the Word of God and calling people to repentance because your nation has sunk into great idolatry. Maybe He already has called you and you need Jeremiah's example to encourage you.



DAYS ONE & TWO

The book of Jeremiah contains more than his prophecies. It also contains some historical narrative, which provides some context to his message. Historical narrative is best understood by making note of people, places, and events, and people are usually the easiest to see, so let's start there. To get to know key people, mark the references to them in some way.

In order to be consistent in your marking, create a bookmark on something like a three-by-five card. Record your key

words on it using the same color and/or symbol you use in your Bible. Then use this as a bookmark for the rest of your study of Jeremiah. Using a bookmark in this way as you go from chapter to chapter will help you mark consistently and save time.

As a general practice, noting geographical references (things you can find on a map) is helpful. We recommend double underlining them in green. Time references, such as the year of a king's reign, are also important in historical narrative. The chapters of Jeremiah are not arranged chronologically, so marking time references is very helpful. As we recommended in "How to Get Started," one technique for marking time references is to draw a clock over them or in the margin of your Bible. Another technique is to simply highlight the phrase in a particular color that you always use for time references.

So here's your first assignment: In your Bible, using the colored pens or pencils we mentioned in "How to Get Started," read Jeremiah 1 and mark every reference to *Jeremiah* in a distinctive way. Later, you can use a different color or symbol or combination for other characters.

Now in a notebook, list what you learn about Jeremiah, including his background, when he ministered, and his reactions.

God is really the central character in the Bible, so we're always interested in His message and activity. Sometimes marking every reference to God in a passage is helpful, but sometimes it's overkill and the page gets too cluttered. You'll have to find your comfort zone with this, but for now, read chapter 1 again and mark the references to God. Then list the key points of God's message to Jeremiah in your notebook.

As you read, mark, and make lists, always ask questions of the text, and let the text provide the answers. Pretend you are an interviewer or investigator, and see if you can identify the who, what, when, where, why, and how of a passage. Make lists with the information you gather by asking these questions.

Looking at chapters paragraph by paragraph is also helpful. Go through chapter 1 again and jot down what each paragraph tells you. For example, what do you learn in verses 1-3? What do you learn in verses 4-10, 11-12, and 13-19? By now you might have also noted a repeated phrase that started the paragraphs. You might choose to mark this phrase throughout Jeremiah as a way of seeing the content clearly.

A little historical background helps in understanding Jeremiah, but in a survey like the New Inductive Study Series, we can't do extensive study. So note the kings mentioned in verses 1-3, look at THE RULERS AND PROPHETS OF JEREMIAH'S TIME in the appendix, and note who reigned when Jeremiah ministered. As we go through the book, you'll find more clues that will help you with the chronology.

Now let's linger on verse 5 a bit and see how it relates to us. Scripture is the best commentary on Scripture, so checking appropriate cross-references will help us understand the truth and apply it to our lives. Read Ephesians 1:3-5; 2:10 and John 15:16. What do you learn?

When you've got the main ideas of the parts of a chapter figured out, determine the main idea or theme of the chapter and record it on JEREMIAH AT A GLANCE in the appendix. When you have completed that chart by listing the themes for all 52 chapters, you'll have your own "table of contents" for future reference. When you want to find a particular topic or event in Jeremiah, you can refer to this chart.



DAY THREE

Every time you open the Word of God, remember that spiritual truth is spiritually discerned. Apart from our resident teacher, the Holy Spirit, we can't comprehend the message of

God. Yes, we can observe words and record content, but the Bible is more than letters on a page. It's God's personal communication to us. Rather than just filling our heads with facts about Jeremiah, we should long to hear God speak to us personally. So don't forget to begin your study time with prayer. Ask God to help you see truth, understand it, and apply it in your life.

Today, read Jeremiah 2 and underline or mark the phrase *the word of the LORD* and similar phrases that indicate that the Lord has delivered a message. This is something you should do throughout Jeremiah, so add it to your bookmark. Idolatry is a major subject too, so mark references to *idols* and add *idolatry* or *idol* to your bookmark. Don't forget to double underline in green any geographical references.

List in your notebook what you learn about idolatry in chapter 2. Then determine a theme for Jeremiah 2 and record it on JEREMIAH AT A GLANCE.

DAY FOUR

Today we'll look at chapter 3, but remember to start in prayer. Now read the chapter and mark the key words on your bookmark. Remember to ask the 5 W's and an H as you go, interrogating the text and thinking about the significance of what you're observing. You probably noticed *adultery* and *harlotry*.¹ Mark them the same way and add them to your bookmark. Did you notice *return*? Did you decide to mark it? Is it important? Noticing key repeated words on your own is an important skill to learn. Mark *return* and add it to your bookmark.

Now list what you learn by marking *adultery* and *harlotry*, and list what they have to do with God's call to return to Him.

Finally, determine a theme for the chapter and add it to JEREMIAH AT A GLANCE.

DAY FIVE

Today, read Jeremiah 4 and mark the key words on your bookmark. Mark *wickedness*² and *evil* in the same way and add them to your bookmark.

List what you learn about wickedness and returning to God. Who is evil? Who can return? How? What happens if they don't?

Finally, record the theme of Jeremiah 4 on JEREMIAH AT A GLANCE.

DAY SIX

Now let's summarize the four chapters we've looked at by answering a few questions:

1. What will happen to Judah and why? In what ways do the words *faithless* and *treacherous* describe Judah?
2. How has God held out His hand to call Judah back to Himself? What action do the people need to take? Read Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6 and Romans 2:29. What relationship do you see?
3. If the people of Judah return, what will happen to them? If they don't return, what will happen to them?
4. What was Jeremiah's role? Read Matthew 28:16-20

and 2 Timothy 4:1-4. How is Jeremiah's mission similar to ours?

DAY SEVEN



Store in your heart: Jeremiah 1:18-19

Read and discuss: Jeremiah 1:4-10,13-19; 2:1-13,20-28; 3:6-18; 4:1-4,14-18,30-31

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- ∞ Discuss the setting of Jeremiah 1. Who reigns, and what do you know about the history of Judah?
- ∞ Discuss Jeremiah's call and God's message to him regarding the opposition he'll face. What application can you make? What message of judgment for idolatry has God given Christians?
- ∞ How will God judge Judah? Why will they be judged this way?
- ∞ What do you learn about the nation that God will use to judge Judah?
- ∞ What hope does God hold out for Judah? What does this tell you about God?

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

What does God do with rebellious people? Does He have unlimited patience? Does He judge righteously? God called Jeremiah to deliver a message to Judah that they would be

judged for their idolatry. God said He would send a nation from the north to bring judgment on Judah. At the same time, Jeremiah was to prophesy to the nations that God was ruler of all.

God knew Jeremiah, just as He knows you and me. God knew that the people wouldn't listen to His message of judgment, but would resist it because they didn't want to believe that life would soon be very difficult for them. He also knew that the kings, princes, priests, and people of Judah could be intimidating to Jeremiah, so He gave Jeremiah a message that strengthened him.

Does God operate that way with Christians? Does He call us to do difficult things for Him? Does He know how intimidating people can be? And does He give us a message that strengthens us in our task? The answer to all these questions is yes.

The Gospels and Acts show us that some people will resist the message of the Savior. The examples of Peter, James, John, and Paul are enough to show that such resistance can be physically dangerous. Most of us in the West don't face physical violence because of our faith or our efforts to spread the good news, but people do in other parts of the world, and that physical violence sometimes ends in death. In the West, we rarely face anything worse than ridicule, rejection, and strained relationships. Sometimes people lose their jobs, but almost no one is arrested for their faith or for sharing the gospel.

Still, our work isn't always easy. How does God sustain us in this difficult task? What message has He given us in His Word that helps us in our faith? Does He make us "as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze," as He promised He would do for Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:18)? And if He does, what do those metaphors mean in our everyday lives?

God told Jeremiah that even though the kings, princes, priests, and people would fight against him, they would not overcome him. God would deliver Jeremiah from them.

We have an adversary—Satan. He is the source behind the opposition in the world against God and against God’s people. And God’s promise to His people is that they will not be overcome, but will be overcomers. The source of our strength is in John 16:33: “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

Because Jesus has overcome the world, we can have courage and peace even in the tribulation we have in the world. Knowing this, Paul wrote, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Similarly, John wrote, “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4-5).

So there it is. We who have faith are overcomers because we have saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our strength and gives us courage. And so John writes to the churches of Asia in the Revelation that they who overcome will not be hurt by the second death, which is reserved for unbelievers. Instead, they will...

- ☞ eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God
- ☞ have authority over the nations
- ☞ receive hidden manna and a white stone with a new name
- ☞ be clothed in white garments
- ☞ be pillars in the temple of God
- ☞ sit down with Jesus on His throne.

Check it out. Read Revelation 2–3. See for yourself. And let those truths encourage you to persevere in delivering God’s truth and to listen to God in difficult times.