

A Biographical Sketch of the Prophet Jeremiah  
Prayer Meeting Talk, August 19, 2015  
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Biographies and autobiographies, especially of the saints, appeal to me—they are inspiring. Often I find myself mentally setting my life and values alongside theirs, offering prayers for a deeper faith and greater commitment. Recently I read the autobiography of Oswald J. Smith. He was the Canadian pastor who founded People’s Church in Toronto. He wrote many books and about 1200 poems, a hundred of which were set to music. His life was characterized by personal communion with God and an amazing faith.

I have also just finished reading the book of Jeremiah. Of course, the most apparent purpose of the book is to relate the historical events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah. This was accomplished by the Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, in 586 B.C. But, also, more especially, Jeremiah’s intention was to communicate that this happened **at the hand of God because** the people of Judah had repeatedly turned away from faithful worship and commitment to him. Their apostasy ultimately led to their exile for seventy years in Babylon.

There is, however, a secondary thread that weaves itself through this book: the life story of Jeremiah himself. We know him as the Weeping Prophet. And he had reason to shed many tears. His home and the people he loved were about to be annihilated. And while Jeremiah lived a very long time ago—2600 years about—I find that there is much to be learned from his example.

Do you remember his story?

The Scripture tells us that Jeremiah was called to his task as prophet by the Lord himself before he was born:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
before you were born I set you apart;  
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” (1:5)

God also said:

<sup>10</sup>See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Jeremiah was by nature a timid person, but God had an important job for him to do. He was to warn the people of their impending doom and implant in their minds the fact that this catastrophe was at the hand of their God—the God that over time they had repeatedly and conveniently forgotten.

To accomplish this task God supplied Jeremiah with the ability to become a man of courage and strength:

“Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. <sup>18</sup>Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land.” (1:17, 18)

Jeremiah was without doubt an excellent communicator. Some of the most beautiful poetry of the Bible was authored by him and is now ours to read. His message was not only one of destruction and despair. It contained hope as well. Consider this promise that God gave His people:

“Sing with joy for Jacob;  
shout for the foremost of the nations.  
Make your praises heard, and say,  
‘LORD, save your people,  
the remnant of Israel.’

<sup>8</sup>See, I will bring them from the land of the north  
and gather them from the ends of the earth.  
Among them will be the blind and the lame,  
expectant mothers and women in labor;  
a great throng will return.

<sup>9</sup>They will come with weeping;  
they will pray as I bring them back.  
I will lead them beside streams of water  
on a level path where they will not stumble,  
because I am Israel’s father,  
and Ephraim is my firstborn son. (31:7-9)

One of Jeremiah’s greatest attributes was his obedience. Sometimes God gave Jeremiah specific words to speak; sometimes he was to act out a message from God; sometimes God called him to a specific task. Whatever God asked of him, that is exactly what Jeremiah did, even at the risk of his own life. At one point, God told Jeremiah to write down all the words God had given him to speak and Jeremiah did. It must have been a huge job—the book of Jeremiah is the longest in the Bible! But when the king was read the scroll, he burned it in anger. The documentation of the broken relationship between God and his people was gone. Jeremiah’s efforts were wasted! What did he do? He proceeded to write the story again. He was committed to fulfilling his responsibility. Meanwhile, he had to go into hiding to avoid the vengeance of the king.

Another time, at God’s direction, Jeremiah obediently told the people they should surrender to the Babylonians rather than stay inside the city. For this, Jeremiah was considered a traitor by many and he was thrown into a deep cistern. He sank in the mud and was at risk of starving to

death. Fortunately, a kind person went to the king and pleaded on Jeremiah's behalf. He was pulled out of the cistern and put instead in confinement in the courtyard of the guard.

God talked to Jeremiah! What does **this** tell us about Jeremiah? That he was a good listener! That prayer was an important part of his life. That his heart was open to the will of God. The two spent enough time together that theirs was a deep, meaningful relationship.

Jeremiah's message was extremely unpopular. He basically said, "Surrender! It's hopeless! God will no longer protect you because you have repeatedly rejected him." The clarity and severity of his message brought Jeremiah a great deal of mental and physical abuse. Hear his words:

Oh, my anguish, my anguish!

I writhe in pain.

Oh, the agony of my heart!

My heart pounds within me,

I cannot keep silent.

For I have heard the sound of the trumpet;

I have heard the battle cry.

<sup>20</sup>Disaster follows disaster;

the whole land lies in ruins.

In an instant my tents are destroyed,

my shelter in a moment.

<sup>21</sup>How long must I see the battle standard

and hear the sound of the trumpet? (4:19-21)

And again:

Cursed be the day I was born!

May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! (20:14)

Why did I ever come out of the womb

to see trouble and sorrow

and to end my days in shame? (20:18)

I expect that Jeremiah was probably considered rather odd. Prophets are often like that, you know. Jeremiah seems to have been a social misfit. He stood on the fringe of society with few friends. He never had the comfort of a wife or the joy of children. Some must have viewed him as a major Puddleglum. But God was able to use even Jeremiah's rather introverted personality to communicate His message: Judah's time of grace had passed. God was no longer going to be merciful—disaster was coming!

One thing that steadied Jeremiah through the horrible turmoil of those days was that he **knew** this was what God had told him to do. This was the reason for his being. He was faithful to that call, even in the face of death.

Jeremiah *did* survive the destruction and ransacking of Jerusalem. Later, he was taken—against his will—to Egypt where, as far as we know, he lived out the remainder of his life. But his life did not have a “happily ever after” ending. The words of hope that he had spoken to the people of Jerusalem and Israel remained as prophecy. I expect his heart was heavy with the burden of a sinful people, the waiting, and with unanswered prayers. Still, his faith remained strong. He awaited the day when as God had declared,

“I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.

<sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbor,  
or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest, . . .”

“For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more.” (31:33-34)

What a story! How can it not encourage *us* to deeper faith and greater commitment? Surely our trials are no greater than that of Jeremiah’s.

So what lessons are here for us?

First, Jeremiah had a calling. We do, too. In the Westminster catechism we read:

What is the chief end of man? The answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

It’s good to remind ourselves often of our calling. Life is more than going through the rhythm of working, playing, sleeping, and eating. There is eternal purpose intertwined with the hours of our day. We are all called to glorify God—to honor him by how we live our lives—by what we say and what we do.

Here is a simple suggestion that comes out of a conversation a friend and I had recently. Why not make it a regular pattern to start our days consciously asking the Lord, “What do you want me to do today?” It might be helpful to say the words out-loud to help gain focus. Then we need to wait and listen for the Holy Spirit’s specific direction.

Second, Jeremiah teaches us by example that God is able and wants to use us as we are—with our talents, our weaknesses, and all of our unique personality quirks. It’s easy to have grand dreams of doing wonderful, impressive things for God’s kingdom, and for some of us perhaps this has become our reality. But for a lot of us life is much more about obedience and faithfulness in the ordinariness of life rather than in any splashiness. We need to be willing to allow God to work through us, whatever the task. We need to be willing—even when we feel ill-prepared—to do what God asks of us.

I sometimes have half-heartedly joked that I spent pretty much my whole life trying to figure out what I was going when I grew up. I remember, though, when we were living in England and I was reflecting on this issue. I felt that God was telling me that my calling was to care for others. Well, that's not exactly a high calling by the standards of most people, but I have tried to be obedient and faithful to that calling. Come be part of our Sunday School class—you'll see that there's lots of opportunity for practice!

Third, Jeremiah was a man of prayer. His personal communion with God gave him the strength and courage he needed to be faithful and obedient to the call of God. It gave him the will to continue as God's spokesperson even when he found himself an alien far from home, still standing alone, still waiting.

I want to be found faithful, too. I want to be sure that when dark clouds gather overhead, I can walk into the storm knowing that God is with me. I believe that the best way to ensure this happening is through a long and loving personal relationship with my Heavenly Father.