

I.
A Voice for God in
Dangerous Times
(Jeremiah I)

Introduction

Some readers may remember the television programme *Spitting Image*, where prominent people of the time such as Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock were portrayed as puppets and, in the manner of caricature, all their characteristics exaggerated. But few people have been more cruelly caricatured than Jeremiah. A 'Jeremiah' has been the name given to a harsh and gloomy individual spreading doom. There is, of course, plenty of stern judgement in the book, but the prophet was a tender and gentle man and it is not for nothing that he has been described as the 'weeping prophet'.

The book is unusual in the amount of information we are given about the prophet's life; only Ezekiel approaches it in that respect. Plainly this is because the events recorded are themselves an integral part of the message, and we shall look at how word and incident are linked. The canvas on which he paints is vast and his range of literary genre is impressive; this opening chapter is a cogent introduction to his life and times.

As we explore this book, we need some markers to help us navigate the ocean.¹ I have suggested a ten-part division (see more on the structure of Jeremiah in the introductory material). The first suggested section is very short (this chapter) and functions as a prologue encapsulating the message of the entire book. It corresponds to the epilogue (ch. 52) and both are deliberately placed as bookends to help us grasp the message as a whole.

In chapter 1 the prophet is called to deliver God's authoritative word to the nations and 'to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant'. The judgement is fulfilled in chapter 52 as the nation goes into exile, but the building and planting are not absent, as will be seen in the exposition of that chapter.

Listening to the text

Context and structure

It is not always easy to find the leading theme of a large and complicated book and we must avoid the temptation to try and encapsulate the message of Jeremiah in a soundbite. Yet it is always useful to have as clear a view of the message as possible to help us in our understanding of individual passages. Such titles should not be too general. 'Prophet of judgement' is too diffuse and it is difficult to think of any prophet to whom that would not apply. 'Prophet of Judah's downfall and restoration' could equally apply to Isaiah and, for that matter, Ezekiel. 'Prophet of the new covenant' jumps too quickly to the happy ending and could lead to a minimising of sin

1. In beginning Jeremiah, it is salutary to remember the Breton fisherman's prayer: 'O Lord, the sea is so large and my boat is so small.'

and judgement. 'Prophet of the costly new covenant' is what I am using as a working title. This emphasises the great cost of the ministry to the prophet himself both in speaking as he did and in what he suffered. In this he points to the Lord Jesus Christ and the ultimate cost of that new covenant.

The great themes of the book are introduced here. The word of Yahweh through Jeremiah's words (1:1-2) is a theme echoed at the end of the prophecy proper (51:64) and punctuates the book throughout – not least in 25:1 and following, halfway through the book, where the exile is said to last seventy years. He is to be prophet to the nations (1:5, 10) and, at the end of the book, chapters 46–51 are devoted to Oracles Against the Nations. The word 'covenant' does not appear in the chapter but 1:5-10 expresses beautifully the covenant relationship. The verb 'know' is a covenant word and covenant language appears throughout the book, notably in the new covenant (31:31-40). The exile (1:3), the grim shadow which falls over the book, culminates in the final chapter with the assurance that the house of David lives on (52:31-34). This continuity of theme is well expressed by Alec Motyer: 'The call of Jeremiah (1:1-19) is a microcosm of his emphasis on the word of the Lord.'²

The chapter unfolds in three sections:

- Who and when? (1:1-3)
- A call and two visions (1:4-16)
- A promise of protection (1:17-19)

2. Alec Motyer, *Roots: Let the Old Testament Speak* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2009), 251.

Working through the text

Who and when? (1:1-3)

The book opens with personal details about Jeremiah which are more complete than for some other prophets, and this foreshadows the attention later given to his personal history. He came from a priestly family but was probably not himself a priest. Anathoth was a village a few miles north of Jerusalem and is mentioned earlier as one of the Levitical cities (Josh. 21:18). Frequently the prophet must have taken the hour's walk over the hills to the capital.

It was the 'words' of this young man which were to be 'the word of Yahweh' to the last generations before the exile. He was to speak God's word in dangerous times, and these were to come through his own personality and style. As with all speakers of God's word, what happens uniquely in Jesus has to be true in a sense for them. The word must become flesh and be expressed through unique individuals.

This word came over a long period of time. The thirteenth year of Josiah was 627 B.C. and the exile was 587 B.C., and chapters 42–44 suggest a short period of renewed activity; thus a ministry of more than forty years begins. The great reforms of Josiah had not yet taken effect, and there is controversy about how Jeremiah regarded the king. In the exposition of 22:15-17, I hope to show that the prophet had enormous respect for the king. The two other kings mentioned, the nasty Jehoiakim and the pathetic Zedekiah, undo Josiah's reforms and cause the rapid slide of the nation to exile and the grim circumstances in which Jeremiah ministered. Of course when he was called he would not know how long and hard the time would be.

A call and two visions (1:4-16)

Plainly, if Jeremiah is to carry out his task he will need resources greater than his own, and this second and longest section of the passage unfolds these. We are not told here (or anywhere else) *how* the word of Yahweh came, but we do not need to know; all we need to know is that it *did* come. The call and the response develop in two stages.

First of all, this is not just a call to a task but to a relationship (v. 4). The Creator is at work here: 'formed' is the word used throughout Genesis 2 of the loving and intricate work of God. Yahweh was already calling Jeremiah to a relationship before he was a foetus in the womb, and if that is true He is not going to let him down now. 'Knew', as already mentioned, is a covenant word; it is used of Adam and Eve's marital relations (Gen. 4:1) and of Yahweh's choosing of Israel (Amos 3:2). 'Consecrated' suggests total dedication to Yahweh's service. 'Appointed' refers to a specific task, and this is not simply to be a prophet to Judah but to the nations – and indeed, in 25:15, to *all* the nations.

But how does this unique call to Jeremiah speak to us today? Romans 8:29 widens this to include all the Lord's people: 'For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.' Each is called to be set apart for the Lord (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2) and each has a task to fulfil. The gospel is for all nations and the church is called to proclaim it (Matt. 28:18-20).

Unsurprisingly, Jeremiah feels totally unfit for this calling (v. 6). He is a 'youth' totally lacking in experience. The word *na'ar* implies a youth, possibly about seventeen, and lacking in confidence. Yahweh does not rebuke him but reassures him. Like Moses (Exod. 4:1-17), he argues that

he is not eloquent and wonders why he has been chosen. Yahweh now shows how His power will be made perfect in Jeremiah's weakness. The real issue for Jeremiah is not what he thinks of himself but that God is sending him.

Jeremiah can choose neither the words nor the audience but is to say what he is told to say and go where he is sent. But this is not simply a command to go and proclaim unpalatable truth – there is also the assurance that Yahweh will rescue him. The word 'rescue' or 'save' is the word of the exodus (Exod. 3:8; 5:23; 6:6; 12:27; 18:4, 8-10) and the God who was with Moses is pledging himself to be with Jeremiah. Similarly, 'I have put my words in your mouth' (v. 9) echoes Deuteronomy 18:18, the picture of the true prophet. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel had Yahweh put words in their mouths (Isa. 6:6-7; Ezek. 2:9–3:3).

The nature of the task is spelled out in verse 10 as being given authority over nations and kingdoms. Six key words are used: negatives ('pluck up', 'break down', 'destroy' and 'overthrow') and positives ('build' and 'plant'). The book of Jeremiah as we have it exemplifies both these kinds of activity. The message of judgement was necessary or people would see no need for repentance and restoration.

The verbal communication is now confirmed by two visions. The almond branch and the boiling pot were not particularly remarkable in themselves, but they are particularly relevant to Jeremiah's situation. Almond trees were plentiful around Anathoth; they had the first blossoms to emerge at the end of winter and were thus a picture of God's silent work in dark days. The springtime would come and there would be joy. Isaiah 55:9-13 uses the picture of the living word working silently and eventually bringing about the new creation. There is a wordplay

here which is difficult to reproduce in English. The word 'watching' – *soqed* – sounds like the Hebrew for almond tree, and just as the early blossoming of the almond tree pointed to spring, so Yahweh would ensure his word carried out its purpose.

The second vision is altogether more sinister as a boiling pot tilts dangerously from the north – the age-old invasion route of the Assyrians and soon to be that of the Babylonians. Yet this is no accident of history, for Yahweh Himself is summoning the invaders. This will be literally fulfilled when Nebuchadnezzar's army break down the walls of Jerusalem and his officials sit in the ruined city (39:1-4). The reason for this (v. 16) is idolatry and forsaking Yahweh, a note to be struck often in subsequent chapters.

Together these visions encapsulate the book. Grace works silently and unseen as the word of God does its work and God works His purpose out. At the same time the thunders of judgement remind continually of His holiness. That is the consistent message of the Bible: grace and forgiveness to all who believe and judgement to those who worship idols.

A promise of protection (1:17-19)

The final short section of the chapter returns to the prophet himself and to another personal reassurance. The 'you' is emphatic, something like 'as for you' or 'but you', and concludes this story of Jeremiah's call.

First, there is the reminder to be brave and speak the words he is given. The prophet cannot water down the message to gain a little cheap popularity. He is to fear no one but God. This is a command which might well daunt the bravest.

But this unpalatable command is balanced by a powerful reassurance. Timid, shrinking Jeremiah is to become a strong city and will be given the power of God. He will certainly need it, for the whole establishment ('kings', 'officials' and 'priests') are against him as well as popular opposition ('the people of the land'). The fight will be long and hard, but Yahweh will 'deliver' him – again, the exodus word. Kidner has a very pointed comment: 'For Jeremiah or for us, God's way in general is not to stop the fight but to stand by the fighter.'³ And again this applies to all God's people struggling in the battles of life. Revelation 17:12-14 speaks of the kings of the earth making war against the Lamb who overcomes them, 'and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.' So although Jeremiah's words were attacked and despised in his own day they are now part of God's written word and a light shining in a dark place until the day dawns.

From text to message

In many ways this is one of the most straightforward passages in the book and in its flow and structure.

Getting the message clear: the theme

Even in the most difficult times, God calls His people to be faithful witnesses to the gospel and He provides the resources to do the task.

Getting the message clear: the aim

At no time is God's voice silent, and His people in all their weakness are called to proclaim great truths to the nations.

3. Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (BST; Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), 28.

Suggestions for preaching

Title: A voice for God in dangerous times

Dangerous times (1:1-3)

- Word becomes flesh in the prophet
- Times of rapid decline

A divine call (1:4-16)

- Called to a relationship
- Commissioned to a task
- Confirmed by two visions

Divine protection (1:17-19)

- Do not hide the truth
- Do not run away from the fight

Questions to help understand the passage

1. What is the relationship between the word of Yahweh and the words of Jeremiah?
2. What do the named kings tell us about Jeremiah's times?
3. What are Jeremiah's main fears at undertaking this task?
4. Look at the negative and positive verbs in verse 10. How do these relate to the preaching of the gospel?
5. Both visions come from everyday life and relate to both growth and destruction. What does this tell us about Jeremiah's ministry, giving both encouragement and challenge?

6. What does verse 16 tell us about how the people have breached the covenant?
7. How are we to fear God rather than public opinion?
8. How do we know Jeremiah's ministry will be particularly lonely?

Ideas for Application

- How do we recognise the word of the Lord? We are not prophets, but we have the word of the prophets and the apostles and these are the touchstone by which we judge everything else. How can we avoid imposing our ideas on the text rather than bringing out what is there?
- Jeremiah is a book about the exile (see the fuller treatment in the Introduction). In many ways the church – certainly in the West – seems in exile with the increasing marginalisation of Christianity and the growth of political correctness. In this situation the book is especially relevant as we try to preach a distinctive message.
- Jeremiah's call is specific to him and yet its essential nature is reflected in the calling of every believer. We need to avoid two extremes: either that every calling has to be specific and miraculous or that God does not call today to specific ministries.
- The book shows that God punishes His people for disobedience and idolatry. It is easy for us to see examples of that outside our own circles, and if we condemn such things we will be lauded as faithful preachers. What we need to do is to see the idols in

our own hearts and in evangelicalism and thus avoid a complacency which thanks God that we are not like others. Where are we in danger in contemporary evangelicalism of creating our own idols?

- Verse 17 is specifically the word addressed to Jeremiah about not holding back anything the Lord tells him to say. But this has a secondary application to us as preachers, especially when we are tempted not so much to tell lies as to withhold unpalatable truth.
- We all like to be liked and there is, of course, no call to set out to be offensive, but the message itself will offend and people will shoot the messenger. Again verses 18-19 are specific to Jeremiah, but the Lord's promise to be with us applies to all who take the message everywhere (Matt. 28:20).