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Jeremiah: Faithfulness Under Fire

Purpose: To help us understand how difficult it was for Jeremiah to be faithful as God's prophet and how difficult it may be for us to be faithful under fire

Key Bible reference: Jeremiah 1.1-10, Jeremiah 8.22-9.3, Jeremiah 20.7-13

Key Verse: Jeremiah 20.9

Biblical Interpretation

If Micah was a prophet about whom we know very little, Jeremiah is an individual whose prophetic life is sketched out in considerable detail. Jeremiah 1:1-10 tells us about Jeremiah's call to be a prophet. Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 expresses the prophet's sorrow regarding the situation of his people. And Jeremiah 20:7-13 contains one of the so-called laments in which Jeremiah complains to God about the situation with which he is faced as a prophet. In order to understand more fully the meaning of these three texts, we will consider several others that provide a fuller perspective on Jeremiah's prophetic activity.

Jeremiah lived before and during the defeat and destruction of Judah. The first three verses of the book date his activity from 626 B.C. until 587 B.C. He began his work as a prophet during the reign of Josiah, the reforming king. However, there is little evidence that Jeremiah thought Josiah's reforms would help Judah establish a proper relationship with God. Jeremiah lived to see his people taken into captivity. He eventually died in exile in Egypt, a land to which he had not wanted to move.

The Old Testament includes several reports of prophets being commissioned by God. The most striking appear in Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1-3, and Jeremiah 1:4-10. There are a number of similarities between these accounts; it is as if

there was a standard yet dramatic way in which a prophetic call could be described.

Nonetheless, several elements in Jeremiah 1:4-10 make this description stand out from the others.

It seems that Jeremiah did not have much choice about being a prophet. Whereas Isaiah said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:8), Jeremiah did not volunteer to be a prophet. These verses say that he was designated as a prophet even before he was born (Jeremiah 1:5). It is hard to know what to make of this claim. Perhaps it is meant to imply that Jeremiah was, by talent and temperament, a natural prophet. However, at the very least it means that Jeremiah did not choose the prophetic life. Being a prophet was something that was thrust upon him.

Jeremiah was not to be left to his own devices, however. When he observed that he was "only a boy" (Jeremiah 1:6b), God assured him, "I am with you to deliver you" (Jeremiah 1:8). Thus along with his call to prophetic ministry, Jeremiah received the assurance that God would support him in this difficult work.

Finally, this narrative of Jeremiah's call indicates that his prophetic authority depended on God's word. This word carried its own power—one that could either destroy or build (Jeremiah 1:9b-10). To be a prophet was to be God's

representative to other humans, to speak God's own word for particular situations.

We know from Jeremiah 1:1 that Jeremiah was of priestly heritage, the "son of Hilkiah (hil-Kl-uh), of the priests who were in Anathoth (AN-uh-thoth)." Early in his career Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of his hometown, Anathoth, at the hand of Babylon because of the sin of its residents. As one might expect, this prophecy was not well received by the people of Anathoth. In fact, they tried to silence Jeremiah and even threatened to kill him if he kept prophesying the destruction of their city (Jeremiah 11:21-23).

Jeremiah kept his ties to his hometown; and in spite of his belief that Anathoth would be destroyed by Babylon, he was willing to view the future of the city with faith and hope. In 587 B.C., just when Anathoth was about to be destroyed by Babylon, Jeremiah purchased some property there that had belonged to his cousin (Jeremiah 32:6-9). Jeremiah used his purchase of the property as a sermon illustration, prophesying, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jeremiah 32:15).

Indeed, the Babylonian army destroyed Anathoth as Jeremiah had expected. But after the Exile in Babylon, one hundred twenty-eight people from Anathoth returned to Palestine with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:23; Nehemiah 7:27). As Jeremiah had said, "Houses and fields and vineyards would again be bought in this land."

Jeremiah 1:2-3 allows us to date Jeremiah's ministry with some accuracy. The thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah would have been 626 B.C. It was in this year, according to Jeremiah 1:2, that Jeremiah began his ministry. He continued "until the end of the eleventh year of

King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month" (Jeremiah 1:3). Jerusalem fell in 587/586 B.C. So Jeremiah's ministry dates from 626 B.C. to 587 B.C. We know from Jeremiah 43-44, however, that Jeremiah actually continued in ministry after the destruction of Jerusalem. He remained in the mined city with the poor of the land.

Many of the people who remained in Jerusalem after its destruction wanted to travel to Egypt as refugees. Jeremiah declared his opposition to this idea. But the leaders of the "remnant of Judah" decided to ignore Jeremiah's advice. They fled to Egypt as refugees, taking Jeremiah and his secretary, Baruch, with them (Jeremiah 43:1-7). No one knows how long the prophet lived in Egypt after he was taken there by the Judean refugees or how much longer he continued to prophesy the word of God. It is generally thought that Jeremiah died in Egypt.

We know more about Jeremiah than about almost any other Old Testament prophet. In addition to the opening verses, we have in the book that bears his name a significant amount of information about Jeremiah's life and career. We read of how Jeremiah was persecuted because he spoke the word of God, of how he had to endure difficulties because of his ministry, and of how he struggled to be faithful under fire.

Jeremiah 1:9-10 is part of the account of God's call of Jeremiah to the prophetic ministry. The story of the call of Jeremiah, recorded in Jeremiah 1:1-10, is one of several reports of prophets being called by God. Other accounts can be found in Isaiah 6 and in Ezekiel 1-3.

We read regarding Jeremiah's call that "the LORD put out his hand and touched" Jeremiah's mouth (Jeremiah 1:9a). Then God explained to

Jeremiah, "Now I have put my words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9b). For a parallel in the call story of the prophet Isaiah, see Isaiah 6:6-7.

Jeremiah 1:10 defines Jeremiah's commission as prophet of God. Jeremiah's ministry was based on the very word of God, which has the power to destroy or to build up. Some of Jeremiah's oracles were going to be prophecies of doom and destruction, including prophecies in which Judah and Jerusalem itself would be condemned because of the terrible sins that the people had committed. These statements of the prophet Jeremiah give indication of God's power "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow." (Jeremiah 1:10)

It was precisely this destructive power that gave Jeremiah such heartache and pain. As he explains in our Key Verse, Jeremiah 20:9, Jeremiah does not really want to present oracles that prophesy doom and destruction. But, he says, the words of God smolder within him "like a burning fire shut up in [his] bones"; and he just has to speak them.

However, as we can see further in Jeremiah 1:10, some of Jeremiah's utterances were going to be more positive. Jeremiah would also look beyond the destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting exile to a brighter day of restoration and renewal. Thus some of the words that God was going to give the prophet would function "to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10).

One of Jeremiah's positive oracles was the message of hope found in Chapter 32. Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonian army (Jeremiah 32:1-2). Jeremiah had been arrested for prophesying the capture of the king and the destruction of the city. But in spite of the dismal outlook for Jerusalem and for Judah as a whole, Jeremiah was able to look beyond

the destruction of the city and the exile of the people to Babylon and to see a day when "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jeremiah 32:15). This brief statement by the prophet would have been a message of hope and promise to people in despair. This word of God from Jeremiah had the power "to build and to plant."

Thus, as we can see in Jeremiah 1:9-10, the word of God is powerful; it can either destroy or build up.

Jeremiah 20:7-13. Before looking at this lament, let us look briefly at the verses that immediately precede it. In Jeremiah 19:14-15, Jeremiah utters one of his oracles that "destroy and overthrow." Jeremiah prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem and the surrounding towns of Judah. Naturally, this prophecy was greatly distressing to the leaders of the city and the religious community. So we read in Jeremiah 20:1-6 that a priest named Pashhur publicly persecuted and humiliated Jeremiah. "Pashhur struck the prophet Jeremiah, and put him in the stocks" (Jeremiah 20:2). Nonetheless, when Jeremiah was released the next morning, he continued preaching doom and destruction.

Thus as we begin the lament of Jeremiah recorded in Jeremiah 20:7-13, the prophet has just been mocked and persecuted. But in spite of his oppression, he remains firm in his conviction that Jerusalem and the surrounding towns of Judah will suffer as the result of their sin.

Jeremiah's poem of lament begins with a vivid description of the prophet's plight (Jeremiah 20:7-10). The prophet complains to God that he really had no choice in whether to be a prophet. He declares that God has enticed him and overpowered him into service. Furthermore,

Jeremiah complains to God that he has "become a laughingstock" and that "everyone mocks" him (Jeremiah 20:7). The prophet shares with God his despair at having to prophesy "violence and destruction" (Jeremiah 20:8a). Certainly, it would not have been easy for Jeremiah to speak of the destruction and overthrow of his own homeland; his heart must have been breaking.

In spite of his heartache and despair over the message that he felt compelled to deliver and in spite of the opposition that he experienced at the hands of those who heard him preach, Jeremiah remained faithful under fire. Indeed, the words of prophecy blazed within him so that he could not keep silent (Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah had complained to God about his calling, but Jeremiah's complaint to God led to an affirmation of faith. We all experience things in life about which we want to complain to God. And we should be in a close enough relationship with God that we can complain about them. But people with strong faith know that God will help them through those times in life that are filled with anguish and despair. God had promised Jeremiah at the time of the prophet's call, "I am with you to deliver you" (Jeremiah 1:8). Jeremiah held on to this promise from God throughout his career; and when Jeremiah was persecuted and mocked because of his belief, he repeated the promise of God and affirmed anew that "the LORD is with me" (Jeremiah 20:11a)

Jeremiah 20:7-13 belongs to a group of texts that have been described as "Jeremiah's laments." (They include Jeremiah 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13; 20:14-18.) In order to understand the later laments, we need to place them within the context of the earlier ones.

In the first lament Jeremiah comments about the persecution he is receiving at the hands of his neighbors in Anathoth (Jeremiah 11:18-20). They have "devised schemes" against him (Jeremiah 11:19b). God responds to Jeremiah's plight: "I am going to punish them; the young men shall die by the sword" (Jeremiah 11:22bc). Jeremiah's complaint, therefore, is answered directly. However, as Jeremiah continues to complain, the tone of God's responses changes. At first God challenges Jeremiah: "If you have raced with foot-runners ... how will you compete with horses?" (Jeremiah 12:5a)

But beginning with Jeremiah 17:14-18, God no longer answers Jeremiah's objections.

We know that the psalms in which an individual laments his or her situation—the most frequent kind of psalm—normally include a response by the priest. By contrast, Jeremiah's concluding laments almost become poems of despair. The lament in Jeremiah 20:7-13 alludes to the commissioning of the prophet. Jeremiah was authorized to present God's word, and God promised to defend him (Jeremiah 1:8). But now Jeremiah says, "The word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and a derision all day long." (Jeremiah 20:8b)

And yet, even as he dreads the consequences of his speech, Jeremiah is ablaze with prophetic passion. He cannot not say what the Lord has laid upon his heart. "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." (Jeremiah 20:9)

In the final lament (Jeremiah 20:14-18), Jeremiah curses the day on which he was born. Unable to keep silent and reaping only scorn and derision, he despairs of life. In an apparent

reference to Jeremiah 1:5, the prophet even decries his conception and birth.