

THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR

Jeremiah 1:1-19

The prophets cannot be matched by any other religious leaders whom the world has ever known. They belong in a class by themselves, both by what they did and in the way in which they did it. The prophet was an announcer of the Word and Will of God. God called them for a particular work.

Three Hebrew words are translated "prophet." Roeh is used eleven times and chozeh is used twenty-two times. They mean "to see," and they convey the idea of a man of vision. That is why a prophet was called a "seer," implying that he possessed a knowledge of spiritual realities which others had not obtained. Nabhi is used some three hundred times, and means "to announce" or "to speak out of the overflowing fulness of the heart." A prophet was a man sent of God to deliver a message of truth for Him. A New Testament prophet was a man who had received a vital message from God and was willing to deliver it out of the overflowing fulness of his heart, regardless of the consequences to himself. A prophet knows what God has to say to men and is both willing and able to say it.

A proper interpretation of the book of Jeremiah is dependent upon a knowledge of the times in which it was written. From the time when Jeremiah was called to be a prophet in 626 B.C. until the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., Jeremiah saw his beloved people fall from the pinnacle of confident hope to the depths of despair. At first Judah was subject to Assyria, then to Egypt and Babylon. Five kings reigned in Jerusalem during that span. One was killed in battle, another taken as prisoner to Egypt, and two exiled in Babylon. The best of the people were deported, and in the end the city was destroyed.

Biographical data on Jeremiah is limited, but what is available is significant. Jeremiah, a son of Hilkiah the priest, was born in the small village of Anathoth, some three or four miles northeast of Jerusalem, about 645, B.C. This secluded village of Anathoth, which was off the main highway and near the edge of the wilderness, was just far enough away from the capital to preserve the calm of country life and to allow Jeremiah to grow up more impressed by the grandeur of Judah's wilderness than by the splendor of Jerusalem's streets. From Anathoth Jeremiah observed the movement of troops to and from Jerusalem and great caravans coming and going out through her gates. His native village was so close to the boundary between the northern and southern kingdoms that it must have had intimate connections with both.

The ministry of Jeremiah began in 626 B.C. and continued for some forty years. It was his hard lot to live through those tragic years. The rich were powerful, unscrupulous, oblivious to the real needs of the poor, and interested only in that which would bring gain to themselves. The poor were driven to toil as slaves with almost no advantages for improvement of any kind. Discontent, hatred and envy filled their minds as they endured the misery of the passing days. Family life was deplorable. Robbery, murder, lying and a constant striving for material things characterized the life of the people.

The whole Jewish nation was falling to pieces from its own sins. Both the high and the low practiced brutish and filthy idolatry. Oppression, violence and luxury characterized the court and the nobility. There was much ignorance, shame and poverty among the lower classes. Outside Jerusalem was waste, bloodshed and wretchedness. Within the city was every kind of iniquity, many divisions and much confusion. Morally the nation was in a state of corruption. It is with nations, however, as it is with individuals--the process of descent is rapid, but the upward process of recovery is difficult and slow.

In 626 B.C. a young man from the small village of Anathoth, whose name was Jeremiah, was confronted with the summons of God to be a prophet. Jeremiah came from an humble, religious home. His ancestors were of the priestly line that had served Jehovah's altars from the days of Aaron down to Solomon. Solomon had brought to an end Abiathar's line and had set up Zadok and a new priesthood. Jeremiah was from this banished priestly house. His family was one that must have cherished happy memories in Israel.

The call of Jeremiah was different from that of the other prophets. There was nothing of the dazzling vision of the holiness of God which put Isaiah on his face upon the temple floor. There was nothing of the overpowering sense of the glory and greatness of God which Ezekiel saw when he was called to be a prophet. He did not feel the Lord lay hold of him and stop him as Amos did, when he was commissioned to preach to Israel. The only thing that was unusual about the call of Jeremiah was the simplicity of it.

Jeremiah suddenly realized that God had been counting on him for a big task from the very moment of his birth. No man ever gets away from such a discovery. Jeremiah was weak, timid and shy, but he was prepared to hear God's voice. He was listening when the divine voice came to him.

Jeremiah's call from God came while he was in a state of calm and exalted meditation. The call of God to Jeremiah is disappointing to those who love the spectacular. The account of Jeremiah's confrontation by God in the deepest zone of his being is given in the form of a dialogue. He did not receive his call to the prophetic ministry in the midst of the temple filled with brilliant light or surrounded by strange heavenly creatures. God and the man were alone in intimate conversation. In the very beginning of Jeremiah's call-experience the divine purpose for his life was revealed to him. "Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, 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 thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:4-5). As Jeremiah meditated upon the purpose of God for his life, the conviction was forced upon his mind that a combination of things happened even before his birth that were to be determining factors in his becoming a prophet. He came to realize that everything that he had received or that had happened to him worked together under the hand of God to prepare him for the work to which he was being called. He was impressed that God was in earnest and had a work for him to do from which he could not be excused.

The consciousness that Jeremiah had been a thought of God before his birth must have stirred the sensitive young man to the depths of his being. Jeremiah did not volunteer to go on a mission for God, but shrank from it as did Moses. To God's declaration of His choice of Jeremiah, the instinctive reaction of the shy and sheltered young man was a feeling of utter insufficiency. He said, "I know not how to speak, for I am a child" (Jeremiah 1:6). Jeremiah was simply pleading his youthful inexperience and lack of ability as a basis for evading the prophetic office. He was not saying "I will not," but "I can not." He was deeply convinced of his inability for such a task as he was called to perform. Jeremiah wanted to do whatever God purposed for him, but he felt completely inadequate for the task. In the accomplishment of the work to which he was called, he considered his youth and his lack of eloquence as insurmountable handicaps.

Shrinking greatly from the task to which he was called, Jeremiah stoutly protested being the bearer of the Lord's message to stiff-necked and hard-hearted people. He knew it would be the most thankless vocation a man could possibly have at that time. Perhaps he recalled

the treatment the prophets before Him received at the hands of their people. They had rejected Amos and Hosea, and Manasseh's men had barbariously killed the far-visioned Isaiah.

Because Jeremiah was hesitating to do the will of the Lord, God took steps to reassure the timid, hesitant young prophet of divine help in the discharge of his prophetic duties. God said, "Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command that thou shalt speak" (Jeremiah 1:7). Thus Jeremiah found himself thrust into the forefront of great events and clothed with an authority that terrified him. The young prophet was assured of divine deliverance from his enemies. God said to him, "Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee" (Jeremiah 1:8). He was given assurance that when "God sends forth His servants he goes with them." He was not promised that he would be preserved unhurt, "but that he shall be delivered from destruction at the hands of his enemies." Furthermore, God encouraged him by saying to him, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9). The secret of his success would not be his own words, but the living Word of God which He would place on his tongue. Jeremiah was being told what to do.

I. The Time. 1:1-7

This was Judah's last opportunity. Her light was flickering. A writer described the reign of Manasseh in graphic words: "Politically, it was a whirlpool. Morally, it was a cess-pool."

II. The Touch. 1:8-9

Jeremiah did not volunteer for service. He was drafted. He did not want to begin, and many times he wanted to quit. Isaiah's mouth was touched for cleansing, but Jeremiah's was touched for empowering. The greatest eloquence a prophet can possess is the God-given eloquence of the divine touch.

III. The Task. 1:10

It was twofold: tear down and build up; negative and positive. The world is hungry for affirmations. Motto of one firm: "We can wreck anything." God's people are not in the wrecking business.

IV. The Tree. 1:11-12

The bud of an almond tree was to Jew one of first signs of coming of spring. God was awake and watching over Judah's destiny. God's activity was about to begin; the activity of judgment or mercy.

V. The Terror. 1:13-16

Near every cottage was a seething pot or a boiling cauldron. Stones on three sides, fourth left open for fuel. Judgment was coming from north.

VI. The Triumph. 1:17-19

Jeremiah assured of ultimate victory.