

JEREMIAH'S EARLY MINISTRY

2:1-6:30

God's word to Jeremiah was not merely informational, but it called for action. He was to go and speak to the people and to make it plain that he was the bearer of God's message.

The urgency of Jeremiah's call-experience was reflected in his early sermons. It is entirely possible that 2:1-4:4 was his first public sermon. There are several themes in the message. In 2:1-13 the prophet contrasted Israel's past faithfulness with their present infidelity. Jeremiah emphasized the initial experience at the holy mountain and idealized the past. In those days Israel was dedicated to the Lord, and anyone who tried to harm her would have to answer to her God (2:3). No nation ever had such a heritage. Israel was a peculiar treasure of the Lord. She belonged to God exclusively. God brought His people out of the land of Egypt and into the land of promise. That miraculous deliverance called for acknowledgement, gratitude and faithfulness in worship and service.

What had been the response of Israel? She had defiled her land, departed from her God and had become like the gods she was worshipping. Jeremiah's favorite word for idol was "vanity", a word that also means nothingness, emptiness. An accurate paraphrase would be "a nobody." In seeking after "nobodies" they had become "nobodies" themselves. Their worship of empty gods had caused them to become so degenerate that they were satisfied with the diet of nothingness the idols offered. Men today become so engrossed in materialistic pursuits that their shallow souls no longer cry out for spiritual food.

In this passage there is strong emphasis upon the fact that Judah had departed from God. That was the source of all her sins. That which is morally wrong cannot be done until the heart and will have moved away from their allegiance to God.

Jeremiah's sensitive soul was severely shocked by the vulgar religion of the people with its hollow mockery, its shallow stupidity and its worldly materialism. Revolting at their sins, Jeremiah laughed at their silly gods, and used scathing sarcasm to indicate his utter abhorrence.

Jeremiah illustrated Israel's strange unfaithfulness in 2:9-13. He declared that Judah's sin was worse than that of any heathen nation; in fact, it was unparalleled in the world. It was indeed astonishing that the people had been persuaded to exchange the worship of God for profitless idolatry. Jeremiah pictured the very heavens as being horrified at such behavior.

The people had been guilty of two foolish sins. First, they had forsaken the Lord, Who, like every fresh-flowing spring, satisfies every thirst completely. This sin of desertion was the great sin of that day. It was an amazing thing. It seems almost impossible that a nation which had been so blessed of God and had risen to such great heights because of His blessing and guidance should, in the midst of prosperity, turn from Him Who had done so much for them.

The second foolish sin was that for their fresh-flowing spring they had substituted cisterns of their own. It is hard to imagine that people would prefer to drink cistern water to that of an artesian spring. Could it be that it was due to the fact that they had to walk to the spring, whereas the cistern could be prepared in their own yard? Many people are tempted to follow the religion that makes the least demands upon them.

This sin was irrational. The forsaking of "a fountain of living waters" for "broken cisterns that can hold no water" is evidence of a foolish barter and an evil choice. Consider the market difference between a fountain and a cistern. A fountain is not a human creation. It is a well springing up, a spring bubbling out of the hillside, fresh, sparkling and pure. It is indicative of overflowing plenitude. Spontaneously the waters come forth from the indwelling resources. They are "living waters"; unceasing, never stagnant, always fresh and refreshing.

God is the fountain of living water. His refreshing grace is ever flowing and in great abundance. It is not limited to quantity. It is fresh, wholesome and invigorating.

A cistern is a large cavity to catch and store the surface rain water. It is astonishing that man would prefer a cistern to a fountain. God makes the fresh spring and man makes the cistern. Can man's work equal God's? A cistern is limited in supply. Besides its contents frequently become impure. Why should man leave a fountain for a cistern? It is still less credible that he should go to the trouble of making a cistern.

This sin is unnatural. With Israel idolatry was an attraction. You can indulge your lusts in idolatry. You can be selfish and revengeful. You can follow your instincts. This sin is unjustifiable. God is always adequate for our needs, and we act wisely and well when we give Him our love and service. This sin is ungrateful.

There is a basic principle of life in this passage. When man leaves that which is right and godly, he must carry on compensating activity. If he does not worship God, he will invent a god to worship. He worships somebody or something.

The saddest fact turned out to be the failure of the cisterns. The cistern cracked and the water seeped out. All their labor had been in vain. So it is always when people try to substitute their own efforts for the gifts of God. In the hour of need they will be disappointed.

Since sin is irrational and unnatural, why do men become involved in it? Jeremiah suggests three motives:

1. Men turn to sin in rebellion against restraint.
They consider the laws of God too demanding and stringent. They throw off the divine restraint. People refuse to be Christians and obey the Lord today because they think that He demands more self-denial than they are willing to exercise. They leave one master only to be enslaved by another.
2. Desire to satisfy sinful lusts.
A second motive that leads men into sin is the desire to satisfy the lusts of the flesh. The man who prefers the flesh must lie in the bed that he makes.
3. Love of money.
There is no crime that man will not commit to get the money that he thinks he needs. This is all too clear in our country. A man bent on satisfying his own whims will not allow anything to stand in his way. A money-mad age is not interested in the rights of men.

What are the consequences of sin? Jeremiah notes three.

1. Sin brings misery to the sinner (2:14-17). As a consequence of her sin Israel's land lay waste and her cities depopulated. All of this she had brought upon herself. Sin brings its own judgment with it. Once the forces are set in action, the result is assured.
2. Sin always disappoints. God leaves the sinner to his own resources (2:28). If one is to meet the crises of life, he needs to walk with God every day.
3. Sin tends to blind a man to his true condition. How can one repent who sees nothing wrong with himself? People don't mind it if a minister preaches against what they know to be wrong. But when he condemns the sins in which they see nothing wrong, they are ready to tar and feather him.

Jeremiah was called to the unhappy task of condemning the corrupt life and sinful practices of the people, of warning against the consequences of sin, of pleading with his brethren to turn to God and be saved.

Jeremiah was by all means the chief figure of his time, towering above every man in the period. He was a patriot, a prophet and a statesman, a wise counsellor of kings and a courageous foe of wickedness and sin. By nature he was sensitive, timid and melancholy. He did not have any home or any family, and much of the time he was without earthly friends. His life was practically that of a martyr, but he bore his sufferings without complaint or bitterness. He was one of the strongest and bravest of men who knew how to stand for the truth without pitying himself. It took a man of the greatest strength to stand uncomplainingly as did Jeremiah.

Jeremiah made two distinctive contributions to religious truth.

1. True religion is essentially spiritual in nature.
2. Personal responsibility is inescapable.

As a statesman with a "world mind" he revealed the effect of the Spirit upon an alert mind. His penetrating mind looked beyond the momentary suffering of the exile to the new world "cleansed, purged, released and prepared" by the will of God. What a wise leader he would have been if only they had listened to him!

Throughout his life Jeremiah was continually conscious of the hand of God upon his very person. As a spokesman for God he went counter to the currents of his day. God alone knew the heartaches, the suffering, the loneliness and the distress of soul that wrung the heart of His loyal prophet. Jeremiah was the outstanding example of intense sincerity, unrelieved suffering, fearless proclamation of God's message and unwearying intercession of a prophet for his people. But the tragedy of his life is that he preached to deaf ears and reaped only hate in return for his love to his fellow-countrymen. His loneliness gave him a vital consciousness of individual dependence upon the eternal One.

There were similarities in the environment, the methods, the outlook and the ministry of Jeremiah and Jesus.

1. They lived under similiar world conditions. Babylon was on the verge of destroying Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day, while Rome was exercising rigid control when Jesus came. In both instances, formalism had a strangle hold on religion.
2. They both grew up in quiet country places where plenty of time was available for meditation.
3. Each of them came early to be rejected in the home community and by the other members of the family circle.
4. Neither of them had the joys and blessing of married life to help when priest and prophet and people opposed them.
5. Each of them was conscious of God's hand upon him in the early days of his life.
6. Their methods of teaching were similar. The simplest child could understand and be blessed by their words.
7. Their conceptions of religion were almost identical. To them it was a thing of the heart. Formalism was despised.
8. Both of them gave evidence of intimate fellowship with the Father.
9. They had tender yearning hearts that spent much time in weeping over the sinning people about them.