

Jeremiah the Prophet

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Whenever a person is born, he or she arrives in a world that has ongoing processes and issues. It was no different when Jeremiah was born either. His nation was on the precipice of destruction, but very few people realized it at the time. About 200 years before Jeremiah was born, God's patience with the apostasy of both nations of the divided kingdom, Israel and Judah, began to grow thin.

God notified both nations, especially the northern kingdom of Israel, of His weariness with their evil ways by sending more than eight prophets over the course of 120 years. God hoped that His people would repent and change their behavior. However, Israel did not listen. Consequently, in 722 B.C. God sent the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V, to destroy the 10 tribes that made up the northern kingdom of Israel.

The two remaining tribes in the South, Judah and Benjamin, were also on a degenerate course that would ultimately result in destruction if they did not repent. In an effort to save the two Southern tribes from the same fate as their Northern brothers, the Lord sent more than five additional prophets to Jerusalem prior to 605 B.C., the last being Jeremiah.

One day, without warning or expectation, God suddenly burst into Jeremiah's reality. The son of a priest, about 21 years of age, Jeremiah was overwhelmed and bewildered by the encounter and the assignment that God gave him. Jesus introduced Himself to Jeremiah saying, **"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."** (Jer 1:5)

Even though Jeremiah tried to excuse himself from the appointment and assignment because of his age, the Lord assured the young man that He was in the business of qualifying the unqualified. (Jer 1:7) Although the Bible does not tell us how many times the Lord talked with Jeremiah, we do know that Jeremiah remained faithful in his service to God for the rest of his life (about 53 years).

Whereas God required an earlier prophet, Hosea, to marry a prostitute and have children (Hos 1:2), God did not allow Jeremiah to marry and have children. (Jer 16:2) The lives and actions of God's servants sometimes reveal living examples of God's future plans. It is ironic that Jeremiah, the last prophet to speak for God before Jerusalem's complete destruction in 586 B.C., was able to rescue and hide the very thing that condemned Judah.

History claims that Jeremiah took possession of the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets God wrote in His own hand, and hid it in a cave to protect it from Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

When God called Jeremiah to serve Him as a prophet in 627 B.C., another 21 year old sat on the throne in Jerusalem. In a way, Jeremiah and King Josiah shared a common destiny.

Whereas Jeremiah had been appointed as a prophet *before* he was born, Josiah had been appointed king over Judah some 250 years *before* he was born! (1 Kings 13:2)

Josiah came to the throne when he was only 8 years old, and by the time he was 16, the youthful king began a plan he thought would turn the tide of Judah's idolatry. Unfortunately, Judah's problem was not the worship of idols on the surrounding mountains tops or the selling of graven images in Jerusalem.

The root problem was the degenerate and rebellious condition of every heart. One would think that a faithful prophet and a dedicated king could make a big difference, but Judah was beyond the point of recovery. God even assured Jeremiah that He would spare Jerusalem if he could find *one* righteous soul! (Jer 5:1)

This reveals a very important point: The reform Josiah initiated, that is, the desecration of altars dedicated to foreign gods and the imposition of laws forbidding gross sin, did not change the hearts or attitudes of Jerusalem's citizens. Even more, Jeremiah's preaching did not change one heart that we know of.

The failure of these endeavors left God with no other option than to totally destroy Jerusalem. Jesus said to Jeremiah, "**My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good.**" (Jer 4:22)

The life of God's Old Testament prophets was always hard and they suffered enormously. Why? To put it bluntly, prophets are sent to identify sin by its right name. Consequently, the prophet was rejected, persecuted, tortured, imprisoned or killed because the prophet spoke against things the people loved and honored!

It seems incredible that God's people degenerated to such a base condition, but it should not surprise us. It is a fact of human life that each generation sets a lower moral stage for the next (even though most politicians will deny this). Therefore, each succeeding generation sees itself "no worse" than the standards it inherited and easily justifies its degenerate ways. However, when decadent behavior is compared to "God's unchanging standard of righteousness," the gulf is very great indeed.

Consequently, God's prophets appear to be madmen or kooks uttering inflammatory words. The world is full of madmen and kooks anyway, so how can we know the difference? There's a profound lesson in this. Truth and nobility of character still pleases God. This has not changed from the beginning of time even though decadence abounds. The malignant power of sin will deaden the most devout Christian's mind if it is not renewed and uplifted to higher standards each day. (Phi 2:5)

The Apostasy of Israel

When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, the young man still lived with his family in the little

town of Anathoth, about three miles from Jerusalem. From his earliest thoughts, Jeremiah anticipated that he would be a priest like his father, for such was the privilege of Levite males. Jeremiah also realized that serving Jehovah would not be easy because Judah had embraced the worship and adoration of numerous gods. (Solomon introduced polytheism to Judah through his 700 wives. 1 Kings 11:3-5)

After Jeremiah's initial encounter with God, he began to speak boldly against idol worship and warned Judah about the coming wrath of God upon Jerusalem. His words were considered blasphemous and inflammatory. Accordingly, most of the religious leaders in Judah, and even his own brothers, schemed to have him killed! (Jer 12:6; 26:11)

At that time, there were many sects of priests in Jerusalem and each sect represented a specific god. (A parallel can be seen today, with many churches in any given city, each having its own clergy defending and defining the doctrines of their God.) In Jeremiah's day, Jehovah God, the ancient God of Israel, was merely one of many gods. God made a point of this when He quizzed Jeremiah, "How could Israel, a nation miraculously delivered from Egyptian slavery by Jehovah, ever come to a place where it could worship other gods?" (Jer 2:11) The obvious answers lie within the following issues:

(1) Spiritual darkness overcame the generations that followed after Solomon's reign because the monotheistic worship of Jehovah was exchanged for the foolish polytheistic worship of the nations around them. Consequently, Israel *became* a nation of darkness rather than a nation of light. (Jer 7:28)

(2) The carnal nature is not opposed to religion, but instead is opposed to divine rebuke. False religion eliminates divine rebuke with pseudo-justification. False religion is a double-sided coin: One side frees the "believer" from careful obedience to God's commandments (lawlessness), while the other side imposes the harshest guilt and penalty for actions that have nothing to do with actual sin (legalism). When lawlessness abounds, people become shameless in their evil deeds. When legalism abounds, religion becomes external, harsh and rigid – people become superstitious and distant from God.

(3) Israel and Judah abandoned God because Jehovah's priests compromised their high calling for power, money and popularity. They failed miserably in proclaiming God's truth. The shepherds of the flock did not teach the people about the consequences of sin, redemption, or about God's restitution and forgiveness. God laid much of Judah's failure at the feet of the priests. (Jer 23:2)

Consider the sins of Judah which God identifies through Jeremiah by checking the following texts – Jeremiah 1:16; 2:28; 2:32; 5:28; 6:10; 7:9,10; 8:7,8; 8:10,11; 9:8; 17:21,22

In Jeremiah 22:3,5 the prophet writes: "This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. . . . But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin."

History confirms the outcome. Jerusalem was destroyed *by God* in 586 B.C. The *servant* of God who wrought the destruction was Nebuchadnezzar. (Jer 25:9) Jerusalem was totally destroyed and the land lay desolate for 70 years so that it could receive the rest it was due. In 430 years, the Jews had desecrated 70 sabbatical years, therefore the exile in Babylon was also 70 years in length. (2 Chr 36:21, Eze 4:5,6)

Last Day Parallels

The book of Jeremiah contains a number of parallels with the Great Tribulation. Here are three:

Parallel 1

God explains in the book of Jeremiah why He must destroy His city, His temple and a large number of His people and then send the survivors into exile. It is important to understand that the one problem God cannot fix is *corporate apostasy* and destruction is the only solution to corporate apostasy. Notice that God destroyed *His* people three times in the Old Testament: He destroyed the faithless generation that came out of Egypt; Israel in 722 B.C.; and Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

The irony in each situation is that God's people could not see or understand their apostasy! The religious people wanted to kill Jeremiah because he condemned their actions, their city and their temple! The Great Tribulation is coming and human kind has not changed. Speaking the truth brings the same consequences today as it did in Jeremiah's day. Consequently, God will send a great king and his army (the Antichrist and his angels) against those who bear His name. (Dan 8:23-25; 11:36-45)

The religious people of the world are in apostasy and they too, do not know it, nor will they listen. When love for truth and the distinction between good and evil is lost among those who claim to know God, that generation is the last! (Jer 11:7-13) The destruction of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day parallels the fact that God will not spare from destruction those who "claim" to know Him best!

Parallel 2

God explains in the book of Jeremiah why Babylon must be destroyed at the end of the 70 years of exile. God also explains to Jeremiah the forthcoming destruction of other nations as well. The Old Testament contains many examples of how God destroyed the people who corporately passed the point of no return. For example, God destroyed the whole world in Noah's day. He also destroyed the Egyptians, the Medes and Persians, the Grecians, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jericho and Nineveh.

Just as God used haughty Shalmaneser V and arrogant Nebuchadnezzar as His servants of wrath upon apostate Israel and Judah (Jer 25:9), God will use Lucifer (the Antichrist) to decimate the wicked of Earth. (Rev 9:4-6) The Old Testament affirms that God grants nations a period of mercy and grace. When a nation becomes corrupt and degenerate, God sends

warnings. When redemptive judgments and warnings have no further effect, God destroys that nation.

By doing this, He cauterizes the degeneracy of sin *for the benefit of future generations*. Using this process, God achieves a higher level of morality for succeeding generations. This also explains why there has to be an end to this world and the creation of a new one!

Parallel 3

In the book of Jeremiah, God reveals some of His future plans for the restoration of Israel and the establishment of His Kingdom. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, God speaks of restoration for His people. Many Christians ignore this point: The promise of restoration in the Old Testament is limited to the restoration *from the Babylonian destruction and the subsequent establishment of God's kingdom at the end of the 70 weeks*.

In other words, the restoration promised in the book of Jeremiah (also Daniel, Isaiah and Ezekiel) has nothing to do with 1948 and Israel's independence from Great Britain. Rather, the promise of Israel's/Judah's restoration immediately follows the exile in Babylon. Notice these verses (italics mine):

25:9,11,12 "I will summon all the peoples of the *north* and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the Lord, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. . . . This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the Lord, "and will make it desolate forever."

16:14,15 "However, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when men will no longer say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,' but they will say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the *north* and out of all the countries where he had banished them.' For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers."

There are four decrees in the Old Testament restoring Israel back to her homeland. Notice the first one that promptly occurred at the end of 70 years of exile (605-536 B.C.): **"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: " 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.' "** (2 Chr 36:22,23)

Summary

The book of Jeremiah offers a number of valuable insights about the ways of God. When the story found in Jeremiah is compared to the story found in Revelation, certain parallels are unmistakable because the actions of God are consistent. He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Consider the big picture. God is about to deal with the cumulative guilt of a whole world. This current generation of six billion people is too diverse and apostasy has gone too far to recover; therefore, God's wrath is about to be revealed. He will faithfully deal with every person.

God reminded Jeremiah of His interest in each person saying, **"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."** (Jer 17:9,10)

One final point. Even though the warning about the destruction of Jerusalem was given over a period of about 250 years, when time for destruction came, the armies of Nebuchadnezzar appeared in *one* day. Even though God repeatedly warned His people through His servants the prophets, there was no "heart" change.

Even though God was patient and forbearing, there was no repentance. Even though God was willing to relent of His wrath, Israel and Judah scorned their Benefactor. If God's own people would not change, what is the likelihood of a religiously diverse world of six billion people repenting from their sins if warned of coming judgments?

History says, "Not possible." This is the reason why the coming judgments of God will commence without warning on *one* day in the *very* near future. **"While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."** (1 The 5:3)

The Bible confirms that advance warnings from God did not change decadent behavior in Noah's day or Jeremiah's day, and sadly our generation is no different today.