

**UNIT 7 JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETIC MOVEMENT LESSON 2****'A PEOPLE-FORSAKEN GOD'****STUDY PASSAGE: Jeremiah Chapters 2-6**

Why were there prophets in the days of ancient Israel? What was their task? We have learned that they were just normal men, with a divine commission. But what was their commission? The aim of this lesson is to examine the message of the prophets and thereby seek to understand the nature of their ministry.

**1. WHAT WAS JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE?**

- (a) Read Jeremiah 2:1-3:5. Of Jeremiah's many discourses, this is the first recorded in his book. Therefore, it must be important in setting the theme of his prophecy. It deals with the inexcusable apostasy of Israel from the Lord.

Verses 1-3 There was once a time when Israel had been steadfast, loving and committed to the Lord and was thus His sacred possession, under His watchful care.

Verses 4-13 It wasn't God who had broken His side of the covenant, it was Israel. Unlike even pagan nations who remained true to their gods, Israel had preferred 'profitless' gods to Yahweh, their own God.

Through the whole chapter, there runs a note of solemn warning, of pleading, indeed of argument, as Yahweh, through Jeremiah, states His complaint against His people. The nation's apostasy is characterized in a variety of figures - an ox that breaks its yoke, a vine that bears strange fruit (v.21), a stain that will not wash off (v.22), the lust of a camel in heat (v.23-24).

Chapter 3:1-5 Contrasting with the happy marriage of 2:1-3, Jeremiah concludes with a much broken marriage which cannot be mended. God remains constant to His Word, but Israel doesn't.

- (b) Now read Jeremiah 3:6-4:4. This is Jeremiah's second recorded discourse. In his first discourse, whenever Jeremiah referred to "Israel" he meant the whole nation, north and south (cf. 2:4). In this second prophecy, however, "Israel" refers only to the northern kingdom (3:12) which had been destroyed in 721 BC. You can see that Jeremiah clearly distinguished it from the southern kingdom, "Judah" (3:7,10,11,18). Jeremiah's preaching commenced in 626 BC, and this discourse was one of his early prophecies given in the days of king Josiah (3:6). Therefore, since Jeremiah was preaching to the northern kingdom (3:12-4:2), but about 100 years after it had ceased to exist, this was really only a rhetorical method that he used. He was actually speaking for the benefit of Judah, (4:3-4) which had failed to learn from Israel's experience that God would punish those who were faithless to Him (3:6-8).

Judah's guilt was in her practices of idolatry and fertility rites (3:9). It would seem clear that, from the time of the Judges on, checked by the good kings but not stamped out, the bulk of the people worshipped God in much the same way as they had seen the Canaanites worshipping their gods. They looked on Yahweh simply as their Baal. Along with this Baalized Yahweh-worship, there was much worship of other gods as well. The important point is that unless we worship God as He wishes to be worshipped, He does not accept our worship at all. It is equivalent to the worship of other gods. Notice the phrases, "in those days", "at that time" (3:16, 17, 18), anticipating the messianic age of grace. This was rhetorical preaching, anticipating a future age, but for the benefit of Judah in the present.

The rhetorical call for Israel to return is now applied to Judah (4:3). But the soil (of the heart) had to be made suitable before sowing seeds of repentance (4:3).

- (c) Finally, read Jeremiah 4:5-6:30. In this passage we find a collection of prophetic utterances. These were not visions of a distant future, but urgent warnings to a present plight. It was their cumulative effect which gave impact to the essential message. In vivid description, the prophet depicted a two-fold danger overshadowing his nation: military invasion from without, and moral corruption from within. Furthermore, the former was the consequence of the latter. Because His people had rejected Him, God was now about to reject them and hand them up to judgment.

Let us now summarise our findings from (a), (b), (c). Jeremiah was a man with a message from God. He preached to the people of his nation condemning their spiritual indifference and faithlessness. They had lost their devotion for God and their blessings from God (2:2-3). Therefore, he called for their repentance. He pronounced the judgment that would come because of their sinfulness and because of their unwillingness to return to the Lord. His aim was their return to the conditions of their covenant with God, not in mere outward reformation, but in genuine inward response.

In Kings and Chronicles, Josiah's reformation seems to be a complete success and it is difficult to understand the collapse after his death. From Jeremiah we see that it was but the last effort to shore up the doomed and collapsing house of Judah, and there never was any hope of success. The reform was an outward show with no genuine change of heart.

## 2. WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF PROPHECY?

The first thing we need to observe about the ministry of the prophets is that primarily they addressed the society of their own times. Their messages sprang out of the moral and spiritual circumstances in which they lived. Each prophet who came on the scene arrived at a time of critical concern in Israel's spiritual welfare. From his own personal, and often characteristic awareness of God, (justice for Amos, holiness for Isaiah, love for Hosea etc) the prophet was deeply conscious of the shortcomings of his people, and he pointed them out.

### Amos

Could very well be called the "prophet of social justice". He preached more than 100 years before the days of Jeremiah, and to the northern kingdom, Israel, before its overthrow in 721 BC.

- Hosea Preached to the same situation. Notice how often he refers to the nation by its alternative name, Ephraim. (4:17; 5:3,5,9,11,13,14, etc). The same social injustices that stirred Amos stirred Hosea. He was motivated by the steadfast, though dreadfully abused, love of God.
- Haggai. Illustrates very well that a prophet was called primarily to address his own generation. His task was to encourage the rebuilding of the temple by the returned Jewish exiles from Babylon.
- Malachi Preached to a different social context again. Coming years after Haggai, the temple had been rebuilt and in operation for some time. He was concerned with the disrespect being shown to God in the people's religious activities. Malachi was sent to inspire fuller devotion and allegiance towards God, and to prepare the nation for the Day of the Lord (3:1-2; 4:1-6) which was still future.

Similarly, the other prophets were raised up to meet spiritual crises in their respective times.

- Jonah Was sent to warn the godless pagans of Nineveh.
- Isaiah Was concerned for Judah's moral decline at the time when her northern sister Israel was being judged and obliterated.
- Ezekiel Preached to the exiles in Babylon at the end time of Jeremiah's ministry in Jerusalem.

Thus, the prophets were typically "forthtellers" rather than "foretellers", as many people often conceive them. Predictive insight was a prominent feature of their prophetic activity, but only as a support to their responsibility of confronting those of their generation with the claims of God. Primarily, prophecy applied to the immediate social context of the prophet. The prophets were the messengers of God, sent to challenge and warn the people of their day for having turned aside from a true walk with God.

At the same time, we must recognise the divine source and inspiration of the message. Because the message was in actual fact the Divine Word, its ultimate significance and depth sometimes extended beyond the prophet's own era and comprehension. Isaiah 53 illustrates this well. Originally the message applied to the situation to which it was addressed. Ultimately, its deeper significance and fulfilment became obvious with the coming of Jesus. In fact, this was why Jesus could say (John 5:39) that the Scriptures witness to him. In Himself, the prophecies of ancient Israel suddenly found a new and more complete fulfilment. He was the supreme Word of God, spoken to a people who had turned away from a true spiritual walk.

### **QUESTION 1:**

What was the relationship of Israel to God in former days (2:23)? Why did Jeremiah now complain against the people and leaders of the country (2:4-8)? What was illogical, and therefore wrong, about Israel's behaviour (2:9-13)? What calamity had Israel brought upon itself by adopting the ways of Egypt and Assyria (2:14-19)?

**QUESTION 2:**

What does Jeremiah see that the now scattered Israelites are regretting (3:21, 24-25)? What promise is made to those who would be willing to return (3:22)? What is the nature of true repentance (4:1-2)?

**QUESTION 3:**

To whom was the prophet speaking in these addresses (4:5,14,16; 5:1,11,15,20; 6:1)? What evidence is there to suggest that the approaching invasion was God's judgment (4:12; 5:9,14,15,29; 6:6, 30 etc)? In what ways had the people brought this disaster upon themselves (4:18, 22; 5:1-9, 12-14, 23-29; 6:13-19)?

**QUESTION 4:**

What place-names identify northern Israel as the object of Amos' preaching (Amos 3:9,12,14; 6:1; 7:10)? What were some of the social injustices in Israel that roused Amos' vehemence (Amos 2:6-12; 4:1; 5:12; 8:4-6)? What pronouncement of judgment did he make against their wickedness (Amos 5:12; 6:7; 7:11, 17; 8:7-14)?

**QUESTION 5:**

Malachi prophesied when the temple had been rebuilt and in operation for some time. What had prevented these Jews from fulfilling this work immediately upon their return (Haggai 1:4, 9)? What circumstances should have made them aware of their neglect without the prophet's prompting (.Haggai 1:5,6; 10:11)? How did they respond to the prophet's direction (Haggai 1:12)?

**QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:**

We would do well to apply the principle of prophecy today. What are the moral and spiritual conditions of our society? What divine message would you expect God to pronounce through a prophet in our times? How could you be a "prophet" in your situation?