

**UNIT 7 JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETIC MOVEMENT LESSON 5****"A PREACHER'S METHODS"****STUDY PASSAGE: Jeremiah Chapters 11-20**

Throughout this section, the writer has inter-woven narratives of Jeremiah's personal experiences with pronouncements of judgment upon Judah. This method provides a fascinating comparison of the message with the messenger. There is always a tendency for the prophet's life to become part of his message.

The struggles which the prophet faced, both of an inward and outward nature, dramatically illustrate the uneasy task of being a messenger of God's Word. In order to gain an overall impression of this, read through these chapters in one reading.

We will consider these passages in two lessons, looking firstly at Jeremiah's methods of communicating his message, and then at the personal trials he endured. As we proceed, we will see similarities in the personal experiences of other prophets.

1. HOW DID THE PROPHET DELIVER HIS MESSAGE?

The prophet was called to be God's messenger delivering the Word of God to the generation of his day. From the experiences of Jeremiah we gain an understanding of the nature of the prophetic ministry.

In chapter 11, Jeremiah was to go to the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem and tell all the people that they were guilty of breaking their covenant with God. The terms of God's covenant-agreement with His people, made at Sinai after the exodus (Deuteronomy 5ff) were still in force. By persistent disobedience to God's law and by idol-worship, Judah had broken the agreement and come under the curse (of Deut. 11:26-28).

In chapter 17, Jeremiah was required to speak his message at the People's Gate of the city and then at all the other gates of Jerusalem (v. 19). He was to speak to the kings and all the people of Judah and everyone who lived in Jerusalem (v. 19, 20). The people were to keep the Sabbath day holy. Keeping the Sabbath involved the self-denial of ceasing from ordinary business. Sabbath was an integral part of covenant law and should not be breached, especially when the culprits were motivated by greed (v. 21-27).

Then in chapter 19, Jeremiah was to go to the Potsherd Gate and speak to the elders of the people, some of the older priests, kings of Judah and all the people (v. 1-3). The place is significant, as it was the rubbish tip for broken crockery. It was an acted parable. He took along a clay jar and smashed it. His message was that God will break the city and people as surely and as irreparably as the jar the prophet shatters before their eyes (v.1-13).

Jeremiah was a preacher. He could not be accused of merely sermonising for the sake of it. He was delivering a message. He went personally to the people, to every class. He spoke clearly and directly,



pronouncing God's verdict and sentence upon the nation. That was preaching. This was the primary function of the prophet, to speak God's personal message to the people.

The books of the prophets are not so much the writings of the prophets as collections of what they preached. They were spoken messages before they were committed to writing. Primarily the prophet was called to preach. In most instances he did not have a regular congregation, or, for that matter, a sympathetic one. He usually had to go to where the people were and gain their attention before being able to make known what God had committed to him. This required both courage and preaching skill.

2. WHAT STYLES OF PREACHING WERE USED BY THE PROPHETS?

Different styles of presentation added their respective advantages to assist the prophet in his task.

In Jeremiah 12:7-13, he uses poetry; in 12:14-17 he uses prose. In 17:1-4 he uses prose and in 17:5-13 it is poetry. Modern translations of the Bible show these differences clearly. Most of the prophets employ poetry, but Jeremiah is the greatest lyric poet of them all.

Hebrew poetry is based on rhythm of expression, not the rhyming of words as in English. This made it a very suitable style for impressing an idea upon listeners whose attention could only be held for a brief time. A Sunday School chorus has a similar effect today. Obviously, our interpretation of the prophets must allow for the natural exuberance of oriental language and the vivid metaphors and pictures of their poetical styles. The popularity of some of these prophetic odes and ditties can be seen in the use of the same poem by both Micah (Mic. 4:1-3) and Isaiah (Isa. 2:24). Joel 3:10 also seems to be familiar with it.

Prose style was a more direct form of prophetic statement. What was Jonah's message to Nineveh in his simple utterance (Jonah 3:4)? In opportune situations this basic message could be expanded. Jeremiah's frequently repeated pronouncement was that God would tear down and uproot the nations who disobeyed him (e.g., Jer. 1:10; 12:14-17; 18:7 etc).

Another style that seems to have become increasingly popular with the prophets as the centuries passed was that of apocalyptic (symbolic) writing. Physical description, not to be taken at literal face value, was used to depict spiritual realities and truths. We must be cautious in our interpretation of apocalyptic passages, and realise that their meaning is rarely obvious, and not always explained. However, in Zech. 4:12-14, an explanation is given for Zechariah's two olive trees. They represent two men God has chosen and anointed to serve Him.

There is an important point to recognise with regard to these various preaching styles. They were not used for entertainment or self-display purposes, but to make the communication of the message effective. Similarly, preachers today must learn that their presentation must enhance communication and not detract from the message.

3. WHAT TACTICS WERE EMPLOYED BY THE PROPHETS?

At times the prophets displayed unusual tactics in their endeavours to reach the people with God's Word. Notice some of Jeremiah's approaches.



In Jeremiah 13:1-11, God directs Jeremiah to present his message as an acted parable. The meaning is as follows: The newness of the garment stands for the nation's pride in itself which allows it to act wilfully against the Lord and seek after other gods. This pride will be humbled by the Babylonian exile, just as the garment was marred by the Euphrates (v. 9, 10). The garment itself, a short kilt, hugging the body, symbolized the intimate nearness which Israel was intended to enjoy with the Lord (v. 11), but which their sin had destroyed.

In Jeremiah 13:12-14, Jeremiah gives a warning in parable. "Every jug should be filled with wine" may have been a popular proverb, but the scene here seems to be a drunken feast. The revellers use the proverb as a witticism; they are the jugs and they mean to be filled with wine. Jeremiah's point is Yahweh will fill them - with drunkenness (i.e., rob them of their ability to act) and will smash them like the jugs they joke about.

In Jeremiah 16:1-4, Jeremiah is ordered to behave in an eccentric manner to illustrate his message. He was not to get married. Later in the chapter he was not to take part in social activities (v. 5-8). Celibacy was extremely uncommon, refusing to participate in funeral rites was ill-mannered and disrespectful. Both actions had one meaning: There is no future here.

He performed other unusual actions (27:2, 8; 32:7, 8; 43:8-10; 51:59-64).

ISAIAH

Isaiah used a parable to highlight Israel's unrighteousness (Isa. 5:1-7). It was about a failed grape crop. Isaiah also adopted drastic measures in order to show the folly of trusting in political allies and not God (Isa. 20:1-6). He went about barefoot and naked for 3 years to show what would happen to those who put their trust in Ethiopia and Egypt.

HOSEA

Hosea's children became virtually "walking sermons" (Hosea 1:4, 6, 9). They were named "Jezreel"; "Unloved" and "Not My People".

AMOS

Read chapters 1 and 2 of Amos. Notice the geographical pattern of his pronouncements against all the nation surrounding Israel (1:3 - 2:5). This was to lull his Israelite listeners into a smug confidence that everyone else was wrong except themselves, before he turned and scathingly berated them also (2:6-16). Imagine the impact of his message!

Sometimes the prophets were able to grasp the advantage of current affairs for preaching opportunities. In chapter 14:1, 13-16, Jeremiah used the current drought as preaching fuel. Drought is a deadly enemy of the Near Eastern farmer, eventually affecting the whole population, human (people v.2, nobles and servants v.3, farmers v.4) and animal (hind v.5, wild asses v.6) and the natural surroundings (ground v.4, grass v.5, herbage v.6). The drought is seen as an expression of God's displeasure.

Other prophets also used local events for preaching opportunities. Joel used a locust plague (Joel 1:4-7), Isaiah used the outbreak of war (Isa. 7:1-4) and Haggai used the poverty of the people due to a poor harvest (Haggai 1:4-9).



It is obvious that the prophets had a lonely and demanding task. Communication is a problem for God's servants in every age. Apart from the deeply spiritual and personal aspects of the message, there are the natural physical and mental difficulties that have to be overcome. The prophets tackled their task skilfully. Their faithfulness is a challenge to our own attitudes, and their resourcefulness an inspiration to our endeavours. Because their message wasn't an easy one to hear, perhaps fullest credit should go to their determination to present it as clearly and as forcefully as they could. They didn't just preach sermons to anyone who was inclined to listen. They made sure that the Divine message was understood. Certainly that is a worthy example to imitate.

QUESTION 1:

Who heard Jeremiah's message in the Temple court (19:14, 15)? Of what wrong were they accused?

QUESTION 2:

Who provided a frequent audience for the prophet Ezekiel (Ez. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1)? Where did Jonah declare his message (Jonah 1:2)? To whom did Haggai speak (Hag. 1:13, 14)?

QUESTION 3:

How did Peter, on the day of Pentecost, interpret Joel's apocalyptic (symbolic) message in Joel 2:28-32 (Acts 2:17-21)?

QUESTION 4:

Why was Jeremiah to purchase a clay jar (19:1, 2, 10, 11)? What was he to do with it?

QUESTION 5:

How did Ezekiel dramatise the siege of Jerusalem (Ez. 4:1-3); going into exile (12:1-6); and rationing of food (12:17-20)?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

What event gave Jeremiah preaching fuel in 18:1-12? What was his message from it? What does this personally say to you?