

**UNIT 7 JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETIC MOVEMENT LESSON 7****"A PEOPLE CONDEMNED"****STUDY PASSAGE: Jeremiah Chapters 21-29**

Whereas the earlier chapters dealt with affairs under King Jehoiakim, the scene now shifts to the time of Zedekiah (597-587 B.C.), and to the fulfilment of the prophecies of destruction.

Because Israel was a nation in covenant with God, her leaders were required to exercise spiritual leadership. They were divine appointees, not simply political administrators. Consequently, the nation's spiritual condition was, to a great extent, a reflection of their leadership - for which they were held responsible.

1. HOW DID THE PROPHETS ADDRESS THE NATIONAL LEADERS?

- (a) Chapters 21-23 of Jeremiah consist of a collection of oracles concerning the Kings of Judah (21:1-23:8) and the priests and prophets of Jerusalem (23:9-40). Notice the spiritual responsibility of leadership.

21:1-10 Zedekiah: The date is about 589, when Judah was involved in her final struggle with Babylon. Zedekiah turns to the prophet, wistfully hoping for a word of comfort. But none is forthcoming. The only hope lies in surrender. Jerusalem is under siege.

21:11-22:9 Dynasty of David: (This was addressed to the royal household generally, though to Zedekiah in particular.) Jeremiah charged the kings of Judah to be just and righteous. Jeremiah still held out hope - fruitlessly as events later showed - that swift reformation of public and private life in accordance with covenant ideals would avert imminent disaster.

22:10-12 Jehoahaz: This king, also called SHALLUM, was one of Josiah's sons, coming to the throne after 609 BC when Josiah was killed. He reigned for 3 months. He was the first leader of Judah to die in exile, and was told not to mourn for his father, but rather for his own fate and that of his kingdom.

22:13-19 Jehoiakim: This man succeeded his brother, Shallum, to the throne. Unlike Josiah his father, Jehoiakim permitted pagan rites to flourish once again, including those of Egypt. He thinks he is king because he can surpass others in the amount of Lebanese cedar in his buildings. This ostentation is contrasted with the austere and moral way of life followed by Josiah, who was blessed by God primarily because of his spiritual qualities. The normal form of lament will not be used at Jehoiakim's death. He will be dumped unceremoniously on the garbage heap, just as dead donkeys were dragged outside the city and left to rot (V.19).

22:20-23 Kings of Judah: The nation's kings ("shepherds") had courted foreign powers ("lovers") for security and prosperity, and virtually ignored God.



22:24-30 Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah and Coniah): He succeeded his father, Jehoiakim, to the throne and ruled for 3 months. His final calamity was to be deported with his mother to Babylon, never to return.

23:1-8 Zedekiah and the Ideal Ruler: Jeremiah rebukes the nation's rulers ("shepherds" v.2), who allowed their flock to be dissipated and ultimately destroyed. Bad leadership is the ultimate attributive cause of exile.

As promised by the pre-exilic prophets, a remnant will return to repopulate the devastated land. None of them will go astray because responsible shepherds will attend to their welfare (v.4). Hope for the future is contained in the Messianic prophecy in verses 5-8. Jeremiah is able to proclaim that God will raise up a Davidic King whose name will indicate his true character, "The Lord is our Righteousness", an expectation fulfilled in Jesus.

23:9-40 Prophets:

Verses 9-15 – the prophets and priests of Jerusalem were ungodly in their open practice of adultery and falsehood, like the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Verses 16,17 - the false prophets were wishful thinkers who uttered false expectations of peace. Their visions are self-induced, not divinely inspired.

Verses 18-22 – these prophets were really imposters. Any prophetic utterances which spoke of a peaceful future, instead of divine wrath, were false.

Verses 23-32 - certain pagan prophets regarded dreams as the normal method by which revelations were given to them. The prophets' fanciful visions were distracting attention from covenantal morality and focused instead on immoral Baal rites. Like straw their idle dreams lack sustenance, whereas the prophetic word, like wheat, nourishes its recipients.

Verses 33-40 - this section contains a play on the Hebrew Word "massa", which means both "message" and "burden". Perhaps people had been questioning Jeremiah sarcastically about future divine burdens, and so he replied that because they had spurned the burden of covenant responsibilities, God in turn would toss them off as a burden too tiresome to be carried further.

(b)

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel, though an exile in Babylon, was concerned for the same situation in Judah as was Jeremiah. In Ezekiel 34 we see his attitude towards the nation's leaders in his metaphor of sheep and shepherd.

ZEPHANIAH

Similarly Zephaniah, also preaching in the days of Josiah and therefore in the early days of Jeremiah, had some blunt remarks to make concerning the leaders in Jerusalem. He accuses these officials of worshipping pagan gods, stealing and killing



to get loot; they are greedy, irresponsible, treacherous and they defile and twist God's law (1:8, 9; 3:3, 4).

HOSEA and AMOS

Hosea and Amos spoke to an earlier generation, and to the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Yet they, too, recognised the responsibilities of leadership amongst God's people. They spoke against the wicked practices of the ruling authorities and pronounced God's displeasure and judgment.

The spiritual responsibility of Israel's national leaders is highlighted in a particular incident that occurred following the restoration of the Jewish exiles from Babylon to their own country.

HAGGAI

Haggai, the prophet, was sent to correct an important oversight made by Zerubbabel, the Governor, and Joshua, the High Priest, concerning the rebuilding of the temple. These leaders responded to Haggai by expressing fear about what they had done and then they obeyed God and his messenger (Haggai 1:12).

Though they addressed national rulers and high court officials, the prophets still spoke with authority. Neither the message, nor the tone, was softened because of the nature of the audience. Indeed, the message was made personal, direct and unmistakable. This was because they uttered the Word of God.

The example of the prophets highlights a responsibility today of Christians towards national leaders. There is the need to make known the Word of God in official places. Pray for our country's administrators, that they might learn the ways of God (cf. 1 Timothy 2:1-3).

2. HOW CERTAIN WAS THE NATION'S DESTRUCTION?

Perhaps, as you have read Jeremiah's pronouncements against the national leaders, you have become aware of a mounting atmosphere of impending doom upon the nation. This was the editor's purpose in bringing together in this collective arrangement, oracles that were uttered over a span of many years. His aim was not merely to report what Jeremiah said to others, but in doing that, to produce an impression upon the reader. The whole arrangement of the book to this point has been creating an atmosphere of the imminence of judgment. Now notice the climax that is reached in chapters 24 and 25, which bring us to the midsection of the book: Judgment upon Judah was inevitable! Chapters 26-29 are examples of the official reaction to Jeremiah's message.

24:1-10: Vision of Figs. Nebuchadnezzar had already deported many national leaders from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597 BC (cf. v1). Jeremiah, in his vision of the basket of figs (v.5, 6), sees that the exiles are the pick of the bunch of God's people. (Ezekiel was among these first captives, and Daniel had been taken to Babylon earlier still.) And God is shaping a future for them. For those who remain in Judah, there is no future, but destruction. Yet through Jeremiah, God still perseveres with His "bad figs".



25:1-14: Mid-Career Message. Jeremiah had been a prophet for 23 years at the time of this address. He had spent the time urging the nation to spurn idolatrous worship and return to the covenant ideals. The disobedient nation would not listen to God's servants, the prophets, so now they must pay heed to a different kind of "servant" - Nebuchadnezzar.

25:15-29: Cup of Wrath. The intoxication cup is a sign of divine wrath and is given first to Jerusalem, then to the southern nations and finally to those in the north. It will fall inescapably on them all, beginning with God's people, Judah.

25:30-38: Roaring Lion. As the mood changes from prose to poetry, so also the image changed from cup of wrath to preying lion (v.38). The Lord's roaring vengeance will come upon all the people, particularly the leaders.

26: The Temple Address. The famous temple address, more fully detailed in chapter 7, is now mentioned again to describe what followed. It was obviously a significant event.

27-28: Rival Politicians and Prophets. Jeremiah walks the streets of the city wearing a wooden yoke in token of submission to Babylon. Only by servitude can Judah (27:12-15), and the nations (27:3-11), escape destruction. It was not a popular message and provoked a head-on clash with the false prophets. Hananiah flatly contradicted Jeremiah broke the yoke (28:1-5, 10), and told the people what they wanted to hear. But time proved the truth of Jeremiah's words.

29: Letter to Exiles. In a letter to those already exiled in Babylon, Jeremiah exhorted a policy of accepting their circumstances and not expecting release for a long, long time. Although in the distant future God intended to restore these exiles to their homeland (v.10-14), for the moment they were better off than their compatriots still in Jerusalem who were destined for imminent disaster (v.16-19).

The storm was mounting. Judgment upon Jerusalem was inevitable and seemed imminent. This is both the emotional impression and the reported declaration of the prophetic writings. Despite the indifference and haughty attitudes of political and religious authorities, and the optimistic forecasts of rivals, Jeremiah remained steadfast to his convictions of doom for the nation. Conscious of the outward facts of rebellious disobedience to God's laws, and constrained by the inward compulsion of God's Word, the prophet could foresee only one result: Destruction.

The message of the prophets was usually predominantly negative. Not because they were pessimistic in themselves, but because their generation was rebellious to God's ways. They simply pronounced the natural consequences. Disregard for God's moral demands, as with physical laws, reaps its own reward.

There can be no trifling with God. Any century or generation that turns away from God, passes under His condemnation of wrath. There is a twofold purpose in national judgment: the vindication of God's wrath against sin, and the purifying of the nation that has sinned. People will scoff at, and resist, such an idea; there will be rival messages, and optimistic hopes and reports. But God's word is true. Judgment follows sin.

**QUESTION 1:**

For what reasons does the prophet Ezekiel dismiss the rulers as useless, selfish and careless (Ezekiel 34:2-6, 10)?

QUESTION 2:

Against what wicked practices of the ruling authorities did Hosea pronounce God's displeasure and judgment (Hosea 4:4-10; 5:1; 6:9; 7:3, 5-7; 8:4; 9:7, 8)?

QUESTION 3:

What was the outlook for those deported to Babylon, as foreseen by Jeremiah in his vision of the basket of figs (Jeremiah 24:5, 6)? Why were they to be so treated (v.7)? What hope was there for the remaining leaders and people at Jerusalem (v.8-10)?

QUESTION 4:

In Jeremiah 26:8-24, what was the reaction to Jeremiah's words by the temple officials (v.8, 9, 11)? How did Jeremiah behave in these circumstances (12-15)? What was the decision of the judicial authorities (16, 19, 24)?

QUESTION 5:

What was Jeremiah's counterstroke to Hananiah (28:13, 14) and his drastic prediction (28:15-17)? What judgment was invoked upon Shemaiah in Babylon because he had protested to the Jerusalem authorities about Jeremiah's letter (29:24-32)?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

With what responsibility did Jeremiah charge the kings of Judah (21:12; 22:3)? How was the nation's security in jeopardy if they failed their duty (21:13, 14; 22:5-9)? In what way does this responsibility apply to the leaders of the Australian Nation today? How does it apply to you personally?