

**UNIT 7 JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETIC MOVEMENT LESSON 9****"IGNORING GOD'S WORD"****STUDY PASSAGE: Jeremiah Chapters 34 and 35**

Two important matters emerge from studying these chapters. Firstly, we gain an insight into the method by which the prophetic writings were compiled. We understand the revealed mind of God as we understand the minds of the men through whom the revelation came.

Secondly, we are soberly confronted with the awesome consequences of ignoring God's word.

These two matters are related. The first concerns our understanding God's Word. The second concerns our doing it. There is a grave responsibility upon us to do both correctly.

1. HOW WAS THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH CONSTRUCTED?

A glance at these chapters will discern that this section of the Book of Jeremiah is mainly biographical. We read not only of what Jeremiah preached, but when, to whom, and under what circumstances. We are given here a fuller picture about the actual historical situation in which Jeremiah ministered. This highlights a fundamental principle of interpreting Scripture. The prophet's message must firstly be understood in terms of his own era. God's Word is always related to history, and it is as we recognise what God said then, that we can interpret what He would have us know now.

When we realise that the city of Jerusalem was besieged and taken twice by Nebuchadnezzar, once in Jehoiakim's reign (597 BC), and again in Zedekiah's time (586 BC), we can appreciate the significance of these stories being linked together. They are not chronologically related, but logically. The two kings had the same sort of experience, and the records of these experiences convey the same message.

In Chapter 34:8-11, the people of Zedekiah's day were condemned for setting free all their Hebrew slaves, and then backing down on their word (and promises to God) by making them slaves again.

In Chapter 35:14-16, the Rechabites were faithful and obeyed the commands of their ancestor Jonadab by not drinking wine. This highlighted the faithlessness of the people in Jehoiakim's day who would not give up their evil ways and would not obey God's commands, but chose to serve other gods.

In Chapter 36, we see how King Jehoiakim was specifically confronted by Jeremiah (or by his words). This is one of the most vivid and dramatic chapters in the whole Bible. Jeremiah is banned from the Temple (v5). But the Word of God cannot be stifled. The message is written on a scroll. Then Baruch reads it in the Temple. Within a single day, it is read aloud in the hearing of the people, the rulers and the king himself. As Yehudi read the scroll, a few columns at a time, the king would cut off that section and burn it, until the whole scroll had been used up. The brazen defiance of the king and his court, contrasts sharply with the reactions of Josiah when he heard the newly-discovered scroll read (2 Kings 22:11). Jehoiakim may burn the scroll, but not even he has the power to destroy the message, or prevent its fulfilment. Patiently, Jeremiah and Baruch write the words again (v32).



In Chapters 37 and 38, King Zedekiah is specifically confronted by Jeremiah. Zedekiah is anxious to know God's Word and 3 times is confronted by Jeremiah's message (37:3,17; 38:14), but lacks faith and courage to act on it. Here is a brief summary of the second and third confrontations. In 37:11-21, we are told that while the first siege was lifted, Jeremiah attempted to go to his home at Anathoth. He was arrested on suspicion of desertion, hauled before the princes, beaten and thrown into an underground dungeon beneath the home of the secretary of state where he was left for some time. But then Zedekiah sent for him and interviewed him secretly, asking for some word from Yahweh. Jeremiah told him that he would be handed over to the king of Babylon (37:17). Jeremiah used this opportunity to beg for milder treatment and he was transferred to confinement in the court of the guard.

In Chapter 38, Jeremiah was again brought before the princes and because he told them that God's message for them was to surrender to Babylon, he was charged with treason. The princes demanded his execution. Zedekiah lacked courage to withstand them, so Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern and left to die. He was rescued by Ebed-melek, a Negro eunuch, and returned to the court of the guard.

Then once again Zedekiah sent for him (38:14) and interviewed him secretly. Jeremiah warned him again that his cause was hopeless and if he did not surrender he would be dealt with harshly. Jeremiah has a terrible vision of this event (38:22,23). (The reality of Zedekiah's capture is recorded in 39:6-8. His sons and officials are killed in front of him; he is blinded and led off in chains to Babylon). But despite this warning, Zedekiah does not have the faith or courage to obey Jeremiah's words.

The faithlessness of the people, and the deliberate rejection of God's warning, left no alternative but Jerusalem's destruction. This is described in Chapter 39.

This logical arrangement of narratives according to theme, rather than historical order, is called an anthology, and helps us to understand how the Book of Jeremiah was compiled. It is more than just a record of what Jeremiah preached and what happened to him. It is constructed in such a way that it aims to speak to every one who reads it. It is prophecy, not history.

We have already seen how the book of Jeremiah came to be written down. Until Jeremiah was banned from preaching in the Temple (ch.36:5), he was able to give his messages verbally to the people. Then he resorted to writing them down and Baruch read them for him. Even when Jehoiakim cut them up and burnt them, Jeremiah and Baruch re-wrote them, adding more. Thus we have Jeremiah's life and prophecies, not in chronological order, but in various themes.

2. HOW WERE THE PROPHETICAL BOOKS COMPILED?

It is not difficult to demonstrate that other prophetic writings are similarly collections of literature, either preached or penned by the prophets and arranged in an appropriate order. Their arrangement is not random but according to a chosen pattern. For example, consider briefly the following books:

(a) AMOS

The outline of this book is: God's judgment on surrounding nations; Israel's sins and failure to learn; Call to repentance; God's judgment and destruction of Israel predicted.



(b) HABAKKUK

The words of the prophet Habakkuk come from near the end of the seventh century BC, at a time when the Babylonians were in power. He was deeply disturbed by the violence of these people and wanted God to act. God will act in His own good time. The rest of the book is a prophecy of doom on the unrighteous, with a concluding Psalm celebrating the greatness of God and expressing the undying faith of the poet.

(c) ZECHARIAH

This book has 2 distinct parts:

- (1) Chapters 1-8 are the prophecies largely in the form of visions and deal with the restoration of Jerusalem and the re-building of the Temple, the purification of God's people and the messianic age to come.
- (2) Chapters 9-14 are a collection of messages from later times, about the expected Messiah and the final judgment.

3. WHY WERE THE PROPHETICAL BOOKS COMPILED?

The aim of the prophetic books was not merely to record what the prophets said in the past. It was rather to provide a challenge to the reader in the present. The order of arrangement of their contents therefore, sought to help fulfil this aim. Consequently, by recognising the outline of a prophetic book, its general purpose can be discerned, and thus, its essential message.

By closely reading chapters 39-45 the main purpose of Jeremiah can be discovered.

Chapter 39 Jerusalem Falls: Jeremiah's Choice

God's warnings finally give way to judgment (39:1-10) and Jeremiah is the only man to have any say in his own future (39:12; 40:1-5). Offered a place of honour at the Babylonian court, he chooses instead to throw in his lot with the 'have nots' left behind in the land of Judah.

Chapter 40:7-41:18 Assassination of Gedaliah

Gedaliah made a good start as Governor. Those who had fled before the army returned, and they gathered in a good harvest after the hungry days of the occupation. But after 3 months, Gedaliah was murdered and the people, fearing reprisals, made ready to escape to Egypt.

Chapter 42-43:7 Escape to Egypt

For all their declared willingness to obey God's Word, when the message came telling them to stay put, they disobeyed. Egypt seemed safer. They took Jeremiah and Baruch with them and as God had predicted, in due course, the long arm of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, reached down into Egypt (568 BC).



Chapter 43:8-44:30 In Egypt: Jeremiah's Last Appeal

Jeremiah enacts his last recorded parable (v8f). He gets large stones and buries them in the mortar of the pavement in front of government buildings in Egypt. The meaning is clear. Though the Judean refugees have buried themselves in well-populated Egypt, they will be discovered and will still feel the weight of Babylon's might. But despite all that has happened, the people still refuse to listen. They will go back to worshipping the "queen of heaven" (see back to 7:18) and all will be well again. Their substitution of Egyptian for Caananite paganism, shows that they have failed completely to grasp the significance of the catastrophe which had overtaken Jerusalem. We hear no more of Jeremiah after this. Tradition has it he was stoned to death in Egypt.

Chapter 45 A Message to Baruch

This brief chapter goes back to the 4th year of Jehoiakim, when Baruch was writing the scroll. Baruch is reproved for being depressed about his future and is given a promise of personal survival to sustain his hopes.

There is a vital lesson to be gained from this study. How important it is that we correctly understand God's Word. The Scriptures must be interpreted properly and their spiritual message recognised clearly and honestly. Then it must be applied to our lives.

QUESTION 1:

For what faithlessness were the people of Zedekiah's day condemned (34:8-11)?

What faithfulness of the Rechabites highlighted the faithlessness of the people in Jehoiakim's day (35:14-16)?

QUESTION 2:

Chapter 36

What and why was Jeremiah to write on the scroll which God commanded to be prepared (vs1-3)?

Who actually wrote it (vs4, 8)?

Why was the scroll needed (vs5-7)?

When and where was this scroll read (vsg, 10)?

What happened to the scroll (vs20-26)?

QUESTION 3:

What happened to both the leaders and the people of Israel (39:1-10). Remembering the message of Jeremiah's book to this point, why did these people receive this treatment (cf. 40:2, 3)?



QUESTION 4:

What happened to Jeremiah (39:11-14, 40:4-6)? What happened to Ebed-melech (39:15-17) and why (39:18)?

QUESTION 5:

In Amos, what is the common theme that links the variety of messages that have been arranged together in chapters 3-6 (3:1, 2, 11, 14; 4:1-3,12; 5:1, 2, 16, 17, 27; 6:7, 8, 11, 14)?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

What do these chapters teach about those who ignore God's Word? What do they teach about those who obey it? What then, is Jeremiah's essential message?