

## ***Jeremiah: Introduction***

(Guided by Patrick D. Miller, 2001)

### ***Preface:***

So. We are beginning our walk through the book of Jeremiah. It's a walk that will take us well into the New Year. We'll pause for Advent, for Christmas, but we'll make some headway in this weird, long book before those days arrive.

And that means that today's message is an introduction message, which, you know...is great if you care enough to learn something, but is never really that "punchy," you know what I mean? I hope that I can lay out some important information about this book, maybe about the prophet who stands behind it, too, and hopefully help us to come to believe that it's really going to be worth our time to walk through Jeremiah together. I deeply believe so, anyway.

And I want to start with just outlining, oh, my preaching philosophy for this book, because, honestly...Jeremiah *the book* is, gosh, not a mess...but a messy thing to dive into. The book is named after Jeremiah the prophet, we may or may not know, who had his own messes to deal with.

And we always have an urge to get behind the book and talk about the person who stands there, this is especially true of these larger prophetic books, these books that have, at their centers, a real character, whose activities give a structure to the prophecies he gives.

But my basic hope is to make Jeremiah the book accessible to us, not to focus as much on Jeremiah the prophet himself, his possible motivations and all the rest, and this is in part because Jeremiah the book is kind of a mess.

Now, some basic things. I'm not going to go through an outline of Jeremiah this morning. I'm just not sure how to do that well in this medium, frankly. I'll post a great outline, and a super condensed one in the version of this message that goes online. Also, I'll be adding some Going Deeper discussions to these each week, too. We by-and-large aren't gathering together in Life Groups, but we may each by ourselves or with our family want to talk about Jeremiah a little bit more, so. It'll be there. Also, I'm not going to talk much about the way Jeremiah is brought into conversation with Jesus' life or is present in the New Testament, but it is,

and I look forward to making those connections when we get to them.

That said, let's pray....

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***Jeremiah the Book:***

We talk about how biblical books are formed, how they come together, because it's fascinating, you know? It's a miracle that God inspires and uses human authors to record the words that give shape and form for how humanity is supposed to live. But Jeremiah, as a book, has followed as convoluted a process of formation as any book we've got.

There are two very different versions of Jeremiah--a Greek one, from what we call the Septuagint, whose history goes back to Egypt--and a Hebrew one--from what we call the Masoretic text, whose history goes back to Babylon. Normally, the Septuagint and the Masoretic texts are more or less the same, you know? Not in Jeremiah. Really different. The Greek is almost an 8th shorter; things are flip-flopped around between the two, and the Jeremiah that was found in the Dead

Sea Scrolls is a little different, still. Now: Nearly all our Bible editions and translations lean on the Masoretic text, the Hebrew Old Testament, but will, oh, highlight and bring to bear the Greek text now and then.

And the book is full of psalms and songs and events that could come from anywhere, aren't explicitly connected to events in Jeremiah's life. It's clear from those who make their careers out of this stuff that Jeremiah's oracles have been edited and moved around and shortened and lengthened and all this stuff. The book has gone through massive editing, and even mentions one of its own editors, Baruch, who is enormously important. I mean, the book itself talks about how Baruch wrote down Jeremiah's oracles, that they got burnt up by this bad king Jehoiakim who we'll hear about, that Jeremiah then dictated them to Baruch again, and a bunch of stuff was added, too. And we hear about at least two other "scrolls" that Jeremiah was commanded to write which we somehow incorporated into this larger book we call Jeremiah. A huge section of "oracles to the nations," these condemnation scenes Jeremiah preaches, were probably their own thing, too, and brought together with all this other stuff into a book that, in Greek, was edited down lean, and in Hebrew, was filled out.

And so Jeremiah is a challenge to us just because it exists the way it does. It reminds us that when we open the Bible, and God speaks to us through it, we are engaging in acts of faithfulness, allowing Scripture to have the authority it claims over how we view the world and what we make of what it means to be a person. It is a radical act of faith to care about what the Bible says, and to even look at this book today.

And Jeremiah himself is a challenge to us, too. But in order to talk about the things we seem to know about Jeremiah the Prophet, we have to talk about Jeremiah's world, and what's going on around him during the decades the book of Jeremiah covers.

### ***Socio-historical Context:***

There are three really important events that Jeremiah covers.

The first is Good King Josiah's reform, which started in 622 BC; the second is the exile of many of Judah's leaders and people to Babylon in 597, and the third is ten years after that, in 587 BC, when Babylon finally wiped out Jerusalem, tore down the Temple, and exiled the rest of the population. These are huge deals

in Israel's history. 622, 597, 587. Let's talk about them.

Remember, Israel was small. A small country, surrounded by empires. And Israel as we think of it by the time Jeremiah shows up was really two Kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, which was usually called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, called Judah, where Jerusalem was. And Israel and Judah were surrounded by Empires. Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Media. During the time Jeremiah prophesies, Babylon becomes an increasingly larger threat, taking over more and more of the Ancient Near East. Assyria, which had been doing the same thing, and had already destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, exiling everyone, has been growing weaker. Assyria try to partner with Egypt to fend off Babylon, but can't do it, and eventually Babylon, supported by the Medes, just takes over everything in the Ancient Near East. But for awhile, in between Assyria's collapse and Babylon's growth, Judah is able to act relatively freely, do what they want. Sometimes they make good choices, sometimes terrible ones. So much of the prophets is about the choices they make to worship Yahweh and trust God, or worship the gods of the empires around them, and trust in political maneuverings.

Into this, Josiah, is born. When he was 18, and had already been king for a decade--which makes me reflect on my achievements--a chunk of Deuteronomy was found in the Temple. It's 622 BC. It had been forgotten, and it was read to Josiah, because he cared about God and wanted to hear it. He immediately tears his clothes in repentance, and in the end launches a total religious renewal in Israel. He abandons the alliances previous kings were making with Egypt and others. Shrines come down, the Temple is cleansed, False Priests are called to account, Yahweh worship is reinstated. It's a whole big thing. Jeremiah is the prophet who helps institute this religious reform.

Josiah dies fighting Egypt. Egypt deposes the son who replaces him, and puts a different son in his place, named Jehoiakim. Jeremiah hates Jehoiakim, and the feeling is mutual. He's a bad king, doesn't care about God at all. He bails on Egypt, gives his allegiance to Babylon, then turns on Babylon. They don't like that. In 597 they kill him, take his family and a bunch of leaders to Babylon, and then come back to complete the job in 587. The king Babylon had put in place, named Zedekiah, decided to try to overthrow their

rule. Jeremiah and others are left behind, but not many of them. Those who are left decide to try to kill the king Babylon left in charge. They do. They get scared and run away to Egypt, and haul Jeremiah and his scribe, Baruch, with them.

Jeremiah's last words are condemnation against this group for abandoning God and their homeland, both. And this is basically on brand for Jeremiah, because so much of what he does is stand around shocked that these Israelites, these Judeans, are totally ignoring God.

***Tricky:***

Here's what's tricky in all of this: We don't actually know, and it's related to how deeply Jeremiah is edited, just when much of what Jeremiah prophecies and preaches actually takes place in the middle of all this king-killing and religious reform and religious neglect.

Today's few verses tell us Jeremiah started preaching in 627 BC, thirteen years into Josiah's reign, and just a few years before Josiah leads Israel back to worshipping Yahweh. But only one of the many, many prophecies and scenes in Jeremiah's life is actually



dated “to the days of Josiah.” I mean, biblical scholars have written extensively about the ways this or that specific prophecy is dated to before Josiah’s reform or just after it, or right in the middle of it.

If we’d kept reading this morning we’d see Jeremiah being called by God before Jeremiah was even born, a passage that gets quoted a lot, and there’s a complicated argument about maybe Jeremiah simply being born in 627, but not really being called into active preaching and prophecy ministry until that scroll of Deuteronomy was found in 622. It’s all very mind-numbing and really interesting if you’re into that sort of thing. (As if being 5 when you’re called makes more sense than being unborn.)

This is why, as we walk through the book, we’ll talk less about how this or that prophecy from Jeremiah had to do, definitely and certainly, with this or that specific moment in Israel’s--Judah’s--life, and more about what God seems to be valuing and why and how it relates to us.

As far as what we’ll see, it’s powerful stuff. There’s prose narrative, there are stories, there’s poetry, prophecy, call scenes, lament and praise. Things read

like memoir and like news-clippings, both tweets and long-form-journalism. It's emotional, and Jeremiah the prophet is deeply, deeply earnest. He's not always likable, but sometimes he's pitiable, and he is occasionally hilarious. I mean, like me, really.

***For Conclusion:***

Here's what I've been struck by as I think about Jeremiah the prophet, and the world he was living.

He was working--preaching, prophesying, acting out these amazing prophetic acts--at a time when Israel was deeply divided, was confused about what it meant to worship God and live in a society, was facing ultimate questions about their society and what shape faithfulness was supposed to take, and who to believe.

In a lot of ways, this is us right now. Not "us right now" the United States, but us right now the Church, God's People, and I think as we walk through Jeremiah we're going to be brought back to the seat of our senses, the core of our identity as God's People, and be challenged to consider personally, our loyalties, our faithfulness, questions about our identity, our sin, our allegiances, and the way we relate to the world.

We'll be challenged to consider these things collectively, as the People of God, and also personally, as Christians who are trying to live well in a milieu that is hard to make sense of. So...it's going to be an interesting book, even if this introduction hasn't been all that interesting, and I look forward to walking through it together.

### **A Preaching Outline of Jeremiah (Based on Miller, 2001)**

- **1:1-10:25: Introduction, Call, Judgment**
  - 1:1-19: Prologue
  - 2:1-4:4: Call to Return
  - 4:5-6:30: Sin & Judgment I/II
  - 4:5-6:30: Sin & Judgment II/II
  - 7:1-8:3: Temple Sermon
  - 8:4-10:25: Judgment & Lament I/II
  - 8:4-10:25: Judgment & Lament II/II
- **11:1-20:18: Laments & Judgment Prophecies**
  - 11:1-12:17: Broken Covenant, "Heritage"
  - 13:1-27, 16:1-21: Jeremiah & Speech Acts I/II
  - 14:1-15:9: Useless Prayer
  - 17:1-27: Heart Problem
  - 18:1-23: Potter & Clay
  - 19:1-20:6: Jeremiah & Speech Acts II/II
  - 11:18-12:6, 15:10-21, 20:7-18: Attacks & Laments
- **21:1-25:38: Against Kings & Prophets**
  - 21:1-10: Chaldeans Attack
  - 21:11-23:8: On Kings
  - 29:9-40: On Prophets
  - 24:1-10: Figs

- 25:1-38: Judgment & Wrath
- **26:1-36:32: Conflict & Comfort**
  - 26:1-24: Threatened Prophets
  - 27:1-28:17: Accepting Babylon I/II
  - 29:1-32: Accepting Babylon II/II
  - 30:1-31:40: The Book of Consolation
  - 32:1-44: A Hope Field
  - 33:1-26: People Restored
  - 34:1-22: Obedience I/II
  - 35:1-19: Obedience II/II
  - 36:1-32, 45:1-5: Jehoiakim's Arrogance
- **37:1-45:5: Kingdom's & Prophet's End**
  - 37:1-39:18: Besieged
  - 40:1-43:13: Murder & Egypt I/II
  - 44:1-30: Murder & Egypt II/II
- **46:1-51:58: Against the Nations**
- **51:59-64: A Final Word Against Babylon**

### **A Super Simple Outline:**

- 1-25: Old World Dismantled
- 26-52: New World Being Rebuilt

### **Going Deeper: Jeremiah**

Jeremiah is a book named after its central prophet (Jeremiah!) who preached and prophesied from the beginning of Josiah's Judean religious reformation past the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. It's a highly edited book, and collects various ancient scrolls together into the form the Hebrew Bible--which we read in English--now has. Today we'll simply share what we know about Jeremiah and what we hope our time in this book can offer us.

### **Prayer & Questions:**

- What do you know about the book of Jeremiah or Jeremiah the prophet?
- Do you have any passages from Jeremiah memorized?

- Do you like reading the ancient prophets? Why or why not?
- Can you think of any ways Jeremiah is brought into conversation with Jesus' life or present in the New Testament.
- How do you hope God might use this for us or for you?