

CHAPTER 17: Jeremiah and Lamentations

So far we have heard the messages from a lot of different prophets. Those messages were pretty consistent – repent or else! And while we know that the people did NOT repent, we haven't focused much attention on their specific reactions to the prophet's messages. As we look at the details from Jeremiah's ministry and hear his words, we will note the people's reactions to his messages. Their response says a great deal about their sad spiritual condition.

Who is Jeremiah? He is a priest from Anathoth in the southern kingdom of Judah, 3 miles north of Jerusalem. Jeremiah lives and works in Jerusalem during Judah's final decades. God calls Jeremiah as a young man to be His prophet. Jeremiah makes excuses as to why he is unqualified – very much like Moses did when God called him from the burning bush. Jeremiah claims that he cannot speak well enough and that he is too young. **Then the Lord reached out His hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I will most assuredly give you the words you are to speak for Me."** (Jeremiah 1:9)

God lets Jeremiah know what kind of response he can expect to receive... **"They will attack you but they will not be able to overcome you, for I will be with you to rescue you."** (Jeremiah 1:19)

Jeremiah goes out to declare God's message. God brings serious charges against His people. The nation has broken their covenant with God. They have violated all the terms of the agreement they made. They are guilty of idolatry. They worship various Canaanite gods. Idol shrines are everywhere! Jeremiah compares idolatry with adultery. He uses words like prostitution, promiscuity, and unfaithfulness to describe how the people have pursued other gods. But that's not all. The people of Judah are also guilty of social injustice. They neglect and take advantage of the most vulnerable among them – widows, orphans, and immigrants.

"Come back to Me, wayward Israel," says the Lord... "you must confess that you have done wrong, and that you have rebelled against the Lord your God..." (Jeremiah 3:12-13)

Jeremiah accuses Judah's prophets and priests of being deceitful. **"They say, 'Everything will be all right!' But everything is not all right!"** (Jeremiah 6:14) The people have a choice – either believe God and follow His pathway to blessing or believe

the lies of the false prophets that lead to ruin. Jeremiah calls on the people to repent and turn back to God. But nobody listens to Jeremiah. There is no repentance.

Jeremiah prophesies that **“an army is coming from a land in the north.”** (Jeremiah 6:22) They will attack. Jerusalem will be destroyed and the land devastated.

Jeremiah delivers a lengthy message in the temple at Jerusalem, known as the “Temple Sermon.” **The Lord God of Israel who rules over all says: “Change the way you have been living and do what is right. If you do, I will allow you to continue to live in this land. Stop putting your confidence in the false belief that says, “We are safe! The temple of the Lord is here!” You must change the way you have been living and do what is right...”** (Jeremiah 7:3-5)

God knows the people will not listen to Jeremiah. Instead they listen to the lies of the deceitful false prophets. They continue to reject God’s message given through Jeremiah and refuse to repent. Because of their spiritual apostasy, God says He is sending judgment. In the same way that God destroyed Shiloh, their former place of worship back in Samuel’s day, He will destroy THIS very temple they are standing in along with the entire city.

Jeremiah calls attention to the spiritual depravity of the nation of Judah... On the one hand many of them come to the temple to worship the Lord and perform all the religious rituals, including animal sacrifices. Meanwhile, outside the temple, others worship false gods. This is going on in Jerusalem! Some are involved in the unimaginable Canaanite practice of child sacrifice. All of this is taking place just outside the city walls of Jerusalem in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, which Jeremiah calls “the Valley of Slaughter.” God declares that in the coming judgment this very same valley will be filled with the dead bodies of all those who practice such evil.

God is very frustrated with His people and He asks why they will not heed the warnings they have been given and repent. **“Why, then, do these people of Jerusalem continually turn away from Me in apostasy? They hold fast to their deception. They refuse to turn back to Me. I have listened to them very carefully, but they do not speak honestly. None of them regrets the evil he has done. None of them says, ‘I have done wrong!’ All of them persist in their own wayward course...”** (Jeremiah 8:5-6) Their continuing to practice evil without repentance leaves God with little choice but to judge them.

Jeremiah says... **“There is no cure for my grief! I am sick at heart! I hear my dear people crying out throughout the length and breadth of the land. They are crying, ‘Is the Lord no longer in Zion? Is her divine King no longer there?’ My heart is crushed because my dear people are being crushed. I go about crying and grieving. I am overwhelmed with dismay.”** (Jeremiah 8:18-21)

Jeremiah's is deeply impacted by the lost spiritual condition of his own people. They are so far from God. Laments like we see here are frequent throughout the book of Jeremiah. For this reason Jeremiah is known as "the weeping prophet."

God ridicules the idols and the people who worship them. **"Such idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot talk. They must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them because they cannot hurt you. And they do not have the power to help you."** (Jeremiah 10:5)

Jeremiah continues to faithfully preach God's message to the people and leaders of Judah. They have violated their covenant with God. He urges them to repent. But as a proclaimer of truth, Jeremiah is a hated man and he constantly clashes with Judah's kings and their court prophets. These false prophets speak lies and they even do it in the name of God! Jeremiah is frequently arrested, beaten, ridiculed and imprisoned. They even put him in stocks. On one occasion even the people of Jeremiah's own hometown of Anathoth plot to kill him.

As a prophet of God, Jeremiah is more than just a preacher. One of his ministry roles is to pray for the people. Despite his strained relationship with them, Jeremiah identifies with them and continues to pray on his nation's behalf... **Then I said, "O Lord, intervene for the honor of Your name even though our sins speak out against us. Indeed, we have turned away from You many times. We have sinned against You ...You are indeed with us, and we belong to You. Do not abandon us!"** (Jeremiah 14:7, 9)

Then the Lord spoke about these people, "They truly love to go astray. They cannot keep from running away from Me. So I am not pleased with them. I will now call to mind the wrongs they have done and punish them for their sins." Then the Lord said to me, "Do not pray for good to come to these people! ...I will kill them through wars, famines and plagues." (Jeremiah 14:10-12)

God's response is not at all what Jeremiah expected or what he wants to hear, so he grieves even more.

Frustrated by his inability to change the wayward hearts of his people and tired of the terrible way he is being treated, Jeremiah cries out... **"Oh, mother, how I regret that you ever gave birth to me! I am always starting arguments and quarrels with the people of this land... Why must I continually suffer such painful anguish? Why must I endure the sting of their insults like an incurable wound?"** (Jeremiah 15:10, 18) Jeremiah is not a happy man!

To underscore the terrible times that lie ahead, God prohibits Jeremiah from marrying and attending any funerals, feasts or celebrations. God says... **"I will put an**

end to the sounds of joy and gladness, to the glad celebration of the brides and grooms in this land.” (Jeremiah 16:9) Because the people of Judah have rejected God and paid allegiance to other gods, they are going to be removed from the land. But their exile will not be permanent. God will bring them back after they have had their fill of the idols in Babylon and have learned their lesson.

God directs Jeremiah to a potter’s house to watch the potter at his wheel. He observes that while the potter is making his pots, one of them becomes deformed. He doesn’t like the way it turns out. So the potter reforms it into another pot. **“O nation of Israel, can I not deal with you as this potter deals with the clay? In My hands you, O nation of Israel, are just like the clay in this potter’s hand.”** (Jeremiah 18:6) God says that He is like that potter. He is in control of all the nations and He has the power to reshape them as He desires.

God continues the pottery imagery, but this time the pot has already hardened so it cannot be reshaped. God tells Jeremiah to buy a clay pot and go to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, the place of the child sacrifices. There Jeremiah is to smash the pot in front of those who are there. **Tell them the Lord who rules over all says, “I will do just as Jeremiah has done. I will smash this nation and this city as though it were a potter’s vessel which is broke beyond repair...”** (Jeremiah 19:11)

Jeremiah becomes increasingly unpopular. At one point the priest in charge of temple security has Jeremiah flogged and put in stocks inside the temple. Again Jeremiah cries out in despair... **“Cursed be the day I was born! Why did I ever come forth from my mother’s womb? All I experience is trouble and grief, and I spend my days in shame.”** (Jeremiah 20:14, 18) Here Jeremiah sounds a lot like Job earlier in the story.

The Babylonians have arrived on the scene and are preparing to invade Jerusalem. Judah’s King Zedekiah asks Jeremiah if God will deliver them miraculously as He has done in the past. Given Jeremiah’s frequent messages that judgment is coming to Judah, the king ought to know the answer to his own question. But Jeremiah boldly delivers God’s response to the king and his royal court: **The Lord God of Israel says, “The forces at your disposal are now outside the walls fighting against King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the Babylonians who have you under seige. I will gather those forces back inside the city. In anger, in fury, and in wrath I Myself will fight against you with My mighty power and great strength! For I, the Lord, say that I am determined not to deliver this city but to bring disaster on it. It will be handed over to the king of Babylon and he will destroy it with fire.”** (Jeremiah 21:4-5, 10)

We know from what we saw previously in 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36 that this is exactly what happens. Jerusalem is destroyed and the people are taken captive to Babylon.

Jeremiah's "Palace Sermon" recounts a sermon Jeremiah delivered 10 years before to King Jehoiakim. It is a scathing criticism against that king for failing to give justice to the orphans, widows, foreigners and the poor of his kingdom and for shedding innocent blood. The point made by this flash back is that God had previously warned Judah's kings. A decade earlier God told Judah's king that Babylon was going to come and destroy them. But instead of heeding God's warning and repenting, the king listened to the false prophets who were telling him what he wanted to hear – everything is going to be fine. So the nation had ample warning and opportunity to repent and turn back to God. They refused and judgment came.

Right in the middle all the gloom and doom of coming judgment is a word of hope... **"I, the Lord, promise that a new time will certainly come when I will raise up for them a righteous Branch, a descendant of David. He will rule over them with wisdom and understanding and will do what is just and right in the land. Under his rule Judah will enjoy safety and Israel will live in security..."** (Jeremiah 23:5-6) Here we have yet another prophecy about a future messiah king and of the restoration of Judah and Israel.

It is clear as you go thru the book of Jeremiah that the nation of Judah is NOT going to repent and turn back to God. And we already know the end result will be the fall of Jerusalem. Jeremiah constantly tells the leaders and people of Judah that this will happen. And when it does, they will be removed from the land. But then Jeremiah gives a detail never mentioned before by any other prophet... **"This whole area will become a desolate wasteland. [Judah and the surrounding nations] will be subject to the king of Babylon for seventy years. But when the seventy years are over, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation for their sins. I will make the land of Babylon an everlasting ruin. I, the Lord, affirm it!"** (Jeremiah 25:11-12)

So then, their exile will last 70 years and after that Babylon will be destroyed. We've already seen in Isaiah and at the end of 2 Chronicles that the exile will end with a decree by Cyrus. Now we know that their captivity will last for a period of 70 years.

Nobody in Judah likes Jeremiah's messages. Jeremiah is resisted at every turn by the rulers and religious leaders. He is constantly persecuted. Some of the elders try and have Jeremiah executed. Only divine intervention saves his life. Several false prophets contradict Jeremiah's preaching. They undermine his message of a coming judgment on Judah with their own messages telling the people everything will be alright.

Chapter 28 records an incident where God tells Jeremiah to make a wooden yoke (worn by oxen) and place it on his neck as a symbol of Judah's upcoming bondage to Babylon. Jeremiah walks in wearing this yoke and warns King Zedekiah not to listen to the false prophets. One of the false prophets in the king's court, Hananiah, steps forward, takes Jeremiah's yoke and breaks it. He claims that God has declared that He will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar. In response God sends a message through Jeremiah that Hananiah has broken a wooden yoke but that Jerusalem will receive an iron yoke from Nebuchadnezzar. God also declares that within one year Hananiah will die. That false prophet dies just two months later.

We know that everything Jeremiah prophesies to Judah's kings comes true. Nebuchadnezzar's army captures Jerusalem. They destroy the temple. They break down Jerusalem's walls. They kill many who resist with the sword. Their puppet king, Jehoiachin and most of Judah's nobility are carried off to Babylon. Jeremiah lives through the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and witnesses the exile personally.

Jeremiah sits down and he pens a letter to the exiles that have been carried off to Babylon. **For the Lord says, "Only when the seventy years of Babylonian rule are over will I again take up consideration for you. Then I will fulfill My gracious promise to you and restore you to your homeland. For I know what I have planned for you," says the Lord. "I have plans to prosper you, not to harm you. I have plans to give you a future filled with hope."** (Jeremiah 29:10)

In the meantime Jeremiah tells the people they are in it for the long haul, so then, settle down, marry, build houses, and plant gardens. **"Grow in number. Do not dwindle away."** (Jeremiah 29:6)

Jeremiah offers the exiles words of hope and restoration. He describes a coming glorious new covenant that will replace the old one, which Israel and Judah have broken. **"But I will make a new covenant with the whole nation of Israel after I plant them back in the land. I will put My law within them and write it on their hearts and minds. I will be their God and they will be My people."** (Jeremiah 31:33) The land will be restored. Jerusalem will be rebuilt. It will be a time of rejoicing and thanksgiving.

To illustrate his confidence that God will one day bring His people back to the land, Jeremiah relates a story from his own life. One of his relatives from his hometown of Anathoth comes to Jeremiah to see if he will buy one of the family fields. From a purely economic standpoint it would make no sense to buy land now controlled by the Babylonians. But God tells Jeremiah to go ahead and buy this land as a symbol of faith in his nation's future restoration. **For the Lord God of Israel who rules over all says,**

“Houses, fields, and vineyards will again be bought in this land.” (Jeremiah 32:15)
So Jeremiah purchases the plot of land.

As Jeremiah begins to have second thoughts about this purchase, God reiterates His promise to restore Israel and Judah. God assures Jeremiah that He will fulfill His covenant to David that one of his future descendants will sit on the throne of Israel. He also promises to fulfill His covenant with Abraham to restore His people back to this land.

The book of Jeremiah then flashes back to events that took place during the reign of Judah’s last kings, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. Neither are good kings. They are bottom line guys who do not follow God. We hear Jeremiah’s words of warning to both of these kings and, not surprisingly, both refuse to listen to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah contrasts Judah’s failure to keep God’s commands with the obedience of a group called “the Rechabites.” The Rechabites are distant relatives of the pagan Midianites (we saw them in the book of Numbers) and now live among God’s people. They are well known for faithfully following the very strict lifestyle commands of one of their ancestors. These non-covenant Gentiles exhibit a level of commitment that God wants to see in His own covenant people. **“Learn a lesson from the Rechabites!”** (Jeremiah 35:13)

After years of preaching in Jerusalem, God instructs Jeremiah to collect all his sermons, poems and essays and commit them to writing. Jeremiah employs a scribe named Baruch who writes down and compiles all Jeremiah’s material into a scroll. In an attempt to silence Jeremiah from preaching his negative messages, he is banned from entering the temple. God directs Jeremiah to dictate a message to Baruch who writes it down on a scroll – God’s judgment is coming on Judah!

The scroll is then delivered directly to King Jehoiakim who reads it. The king shows his utter contempt for God’s word. He cuts the scroll up into little pieces and burns it. Rather than repent, which he should have done, the king orders both Jeremiah and Baruch to be arrested. **But the Lord hid them.** (Jeremiah 36:26)

God directs Jeremiah to dictate the same message as before to Baruch. But this time he adds that King Jehoiakim will die and none of his descendants will succeed him on David’s throne. Sure enough, Jehoiakim is killed during one of the sieges of Jerusalem and his son Jehoiachin is taken captive to Babylon.

The next king to rule in Judah, Zedekiah, is a vassal king appointed by the Babylonians to rule in place of Jehoiakim’s son. **Neither he nor the officials who served him nor the people of Judah paid any attention to what the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah.** (Jeremiah 37:2)

Jeremiah repeats his recurring message to King Zedekiah – the Babylonian forces will capture Jerusalem. Jeremiah urges the people to surrender to the Babylonians and save their lives. For saying this he is beaten and imprisoned. Jeremiah is charged with treason and lowered down into a cistern (a deep well) and left to die there. But God intervenes and Jeremiah is rescued. Jeremiah again urges Zedekiah to surrender to the Babylonians. And again, big surprise, Zedekiah does not listen to Jeremiah.

Chapters 39 and 52 (the last chapter) recount in detail the events from 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36. Jerusalem comes under siege and is destroyed by Babylon. The temple is burned and the people are exiled to Babylon. **So Judah was taken into exile out of its land.** (Jeremiah 52:27)

King Zedekiah flees the city, but the Babylonians catch him near Jericho. They kill all the nobles as well as Zedekiah's sons. After Zedekiah is forced to watch his sons die, the Babylonians blind him and carry him off in chains. By contrast the Babylonians treat Jeremiah with respect. He is given a choice to either go to Babylon or stay in his homeland. He opts to remain in Jerusalem.

During the fall of Jerusalem some of the people try to escape. They turn to Jeremiah (the same guy they refused to listen to before) and they plead with him for guidance. Jeremiah gives them a message from God... **“Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him,” declares the Lord, “for I am with you to save you and deliver you from his hand.”** (Jeremiah 42:11) Jeremiah says that God will protect them if they remain in Judah. But if they go to Egypt like they are planning to do, they will die.

Do they listen to Jeremiah this time? No. They ignore his warning and head down to Egypt anyway. They even force Jeremiah to go with them! While in Egypt Jeremiah confirms God's judgment on His stubborn people. He predicts an invasion of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar. In other words, there will be no safety in Egypt for God's people.

Toward the end of the book Jeremiah delivers a series of oracle judgments against several nations, all enemies of God's people – Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus (Syria), Kedar and Hazor, Elam and Babylon. These judgments are God's response to their violent actions against Judah and for their idolatry and arrogance.

The book of Jeremiah contains many warnings and judgments against God's covenant people. But it also contains some important words of hope for them. He assures the people who are now living in Babylon that God has not abandoned them. There is still a future and a hope for Israel.

Sadly, the picture we are left with as the book of Jeremiah concludes is expressed in Psalm 137:1: **By the rivers of Babylon we sit down and weep when we remember Zion (Jerusalem).**

The sad lament of the people in exile and the stunning image of Jerusalem lying in smoldering ruins is where the book of Lamentations picks up. Jeremiah is writing and he reveals the pain and confusion experienced by the God's people during their period of exile. **Alas! The city once full of people now sits all alone!** (Lamentations 1:1)

Jeremiah offers up five laments. The first one looks closely on the grief and shame of a widow, referred to as "the prominent lady" and Daughter of Zion." This widow personifies the now desolate city of Jerusalem. She sits alone weeping. **I weep because of these things; my eyes flow with tears for there is no one in sight who can comfort me or encourage me. My children are desolated because an enemy has prevailed.** (Lamentations 1:16) She calls on God to notice her condition and to feel compassion for her. A part of future restoration looks forward to a time of comfort. But for now, there is no comfort.

The second lament focuses on the righteous anger of the Lord. It recognizes that what happened to Jerusalem was the direct result of Judah's sin. Centuries before, the nation entered a covenant agreement with God. But they violated it by worshiping idols and a multitude of other sins. God is slow to anger, but His wrath will not remain restrained forever. In Jerusalem's case, God's anger led to Babylon conquering the city. So, while God's anger is justified, Jeremiah pleads for compassion. **Look, O Lord! Consider! Whom have You ever afflicted like this?** (Lamentations 2:20) He calls attention to the innocent children, women, and old people who are suffering as a result of this calamity.

The third lament is the cry of a suffering, grieving, and lonely man. He personifies the nation of Judah. The suffering the nation is going through offers Jeremiah hope. Because of God's covenant faithfulness, the people will not perish. **The Lord's loyal kindness never ceases; His compassions never end. They are fresh every morning; Your faithfulness is abundant! "My portion is the Lord," I have said to myself, so I will put my hope in Him.**" (Lamentations 3:22-24) Again we see a familiar theme – God's present judgment leads to a future hope.

The fourth lament gives us a vivid picture of Babylon's two-year siege of Jerusalem. It contrasts the good old days in Jerusalem with how terrible things were during and after the siege. We see graphic images of the children, who used to laugh and play, now begging for food. Those who once ate fancy foods now eat whatever they can scrounge up. Royalty who was once adorned with splendor is now dirty and barely recognizable. The anointed king from the line of David sits in a foreign prison. It all

harkens back to the warnings, the curses in Deuteronomy 28. Sadly, these images we now see of Judah's pain and suffering are of their own making.

The final lament is a national prayer for God's mercy. The survivors in exile, sons and daughters of many who perished, cry out... **"Our forefathers sinned and are dead, but we suffer their punishment."** (Lamentations 5:7) They acknowledge that this terrible judgment is deserved, that God is sovereign, and that He has the power to restore them. They plead with God not to ignore their suffering or abandon them.

Jeremiah acknowledges that God is the eternal King of the world. Yet, the people's current state of mind and body makes them feel as though God is nowhere to be found. And you can understand this. The final words of Lamentations echo the feelings of the people during their 70 years of exile... **"Why do You keep forgetting us? Why do You forsake us so long? Bring us back to Yourself, O Lord, so that we may return to You; renew our life as in days before, unless You have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure."** (Lamentations 5:20-22)

So, is the damage that has been done beyond repair? Ezekiel and Daniel do not think so. These two prophets of God who minister during the period of the Exile offer a vision of God's future plans for His people even now as they are forced to live thousands of miles from home.