

Judah after Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE)

Jeremiah Rebukes an Unfaithful Nation

Readings: *Jeremiah 5:14-31; 6:1-30*

Reflections:

- This section opens with a powerful image: “I will make my words in your mouth a fire and these people the wood it consumes.” This idea of the prophetic word of God being a powerful force is repeated many times in Scripture. Isaiah (49:2) said, “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword.” This same image is repeated in Revelations as Jesus comes with a sword coming from his mouth (1:16, 2:16; 19:15). Anyone who has experienced the power of God’s prophetic word will agree that it has a way of cutting to heart of the matter, dividing soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12).
- As we see God’s judgment declared yet again, we see his promise not to destroy them completely (his desire to save a remnant) and his desire for his people to listen to him (eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear – see Isaiah 6 for a parallel passage) and humble themselves before him (tremble before him). The ultimate issue: “stubborn and rebellious hearts.” Again, it is not their failure to be religious but relational with God. Their hard-heartedness toward God results in their hard heartedness towards those he has compassion for: “they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it, they do not defend the rights of the poor.” All of this spiritual rebellion is under girded by corrupt spiritual leadership: “The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority.” And how does everyone respond: “my people love it that way.” Our hearts naturally love self-centeredness and pride. It is a good reminder that just because religious people are happy, that God is happy with them. Do they have compassion for the poor? Do they seek God with all their hearts? Are they soft hearted and humble? Do they seek an intimate relationship with God? These are the questions we must ask of ourselves, not are we happy. As Jeremiah warns in this section, “The word of the Lord is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it.”
- God’s judgment against Jerusalem affects all people from all ages. This is the sad reality of the consequences of corporate rebellion against God.
- We see again in Jeremiah 6:13-14 the marks of rebellious spiritual leadership: “greedy for gain,” “dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious,” “peace, peace,

they say when there is no peace.” They have lost all sensitivity (“don’t even know how to blush”) as they lead their people to reject God. Yikes! This is a “feel good only” type of leadership that ultimately only cares if they make money off of their positions of influence.

- But God offers a way out for those who want it: “Stand at the crossroads (place of decision) and look (use spiritual discernment): ask for the ancient paths (God’s unchanging truth of how to love and serve him), ask where the good way is (how do I practically live that way today) and walk in it (just do it), and you will find rest for your souls (finally have peace and joy with God).” Sounds like good advice, but unfortunately they openly reject God’s grace (“but you said, ‘we will not walk in it.’”)
- Unless our hearts are right with God, what we offer him means nothing: “Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, your sacrifices do not please me.” Religion really makes God angry when it is a cover up for hearts that refuse to listen to him and humbly follow him.
- God follows up with an interesting statement: “I will put obstacles before this people, fathers and sons alike will stumble over them.” It is interesting that Jesus would be called a “scandalon” – a stumbling stone, that makes people stumble and fall (Isaiah 8:14, Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8).
- As Jeremiah wraps up this section we see him insert a simple phrase in a longer section on God’s judgment that is eye-catching. “Mourn with bitter wailing as for an only son.” Within the context of Israel, a family who had only one son and then witnessed that son die at an early age, was a family without lineage or legacy. They would weep for the loss of their child but it would be also the loss of their future, their grandchildren and their family inheritance. Their daughters would most likely marry into another family and be part of their ongoing legacy, but their immediate family line would end. As a father who would one day watch his son die, God’s heart would understand the deep grief of losing a son. Yet beyond this, in using this image he plants a seed that at some point the spiritual lineage of Israel as they understood it would come to an end. We will see that in the coming of the Messiah, the true king of Israel and the one who initiated a new kingdom that would welcome all nations, Israel’s unique role as the sole people of God would come to an end. Their legacy was now to be carried on within a new “called out” people, the followers of Jesus the Messiah.
- In the final verses of Jeremiah 6 we see the acknowledgement that all of this judgment ultimately won’t work: “the refining goes on in vain, the wicked are not purged out.” The story of what doesn’t work continues. What at great day it will be when we begin the story of what does work and mercy triumphs over judgment!