

# JEREMIAH LAMENTATIONS



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**Assyrian soldiers with battering ram attacking Lachish (2 Kings 18:13-14)**

The career of the prophet Jeremiah spanned the most turbulent years in the history of Jerusalem and Judah. Called to be a prophet in 626 B.C., his last activity of which we have knowledge occurred in the late 580's. For almost forty years he carried the burdens of Judah's life. But he could not turn the tide that eventually led to the destruction of the state, the holy city of Jerusalem, the sacred Temple, and the chosen dynasty of the Davidic family.

In order to understand the career of this

prophet as well as the book that bears his name, let's sketch briefly the main historical events of Jeremiah's day.

The time of Jeremiah's call coincided with the beginning of the demise of the hated Assyrian Empire. For over one hundred years the Assyrians had ruled most of the Near East, including Judah. They had governed with an iron hand and a heart of stone. War scenes dominated Assyrian art—towns being captured, exiles being led away, prisoners being impaled on sharp

people's obedience to God and to God's transformation of the world. Read the words about the future in Isaiah 65:17-18.

Read Isaiah 55:6-11 and answer the questions below.

a. What does the writer of the book exhort persons to do?

b. Why should persons obey the exhortation?

c. How do the thoughts and ways of God compare to our ways and thoughts?

d. Describe in your own words the character of God's word as it is pictured in verse 11.

### **SUMMARY**

Remember the following three points that constitute the message of Isaiah.

- (1) Judgment on Judah for her disobedience to God, in First Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39)
- (2) God's deliverance of his people from exile in Babylon, in Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55)
- (3) God's future transformation of the world into a place for rejoicing, in Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66)

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Scholars hold the opinion that our present book is actually made up of the work of three prophets. Many persons still hold the traditional view that one Isaiah, Isaiah of Jerusalem, wrote the complete book. If there were three distinct writers, how might these works have been brought together? Why would the memory of this joining be lost? If the scholarly opinion about the book is correct, how does it affect our understanding of the book as the Word of God?

2. The call of Isaiah was a powerful spiritual experience. Not every prophet left a record of his call, but the prophetic calls we know about are different from one another. You might want to compare the call of Moses (Exodus 3-4) with the call of Isaiah. Paul's call (conversion) on the road to Damascus is a New Testament example (see Acts 9). Discuss the call of God in Christ in the New Testament and in our time. Discuss the range of spiritual experience that different people undergo when they sense God calling them. How have you felt God calling you?

3. The Book of Isaiah is the source of many statements about the Messiah. Jews before Jesus' time referred to the book as they thought about his coming. Was Jesus the Messiah? Read Isaiah 61:1-2, then turn to Luke 4:16-21. Read it and discuss how Jesus answered the question of whether he was the Messiah.

4. Read the Servant Song in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. What does the prophet say about this servant that reminds you of Jesus Christ?

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### **DAILY READINGS FOR JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS**

- Day 1: Jeremiah 1:1-12  
Day 2: Jeremiah 7:1-15  
Day 3: Jeremiah 20:7-18  
Day 4: Jeremiah 31:23-37  
Day 5: Jeremiah 32:6-25  
Day 6: Jeremiah 52:12-27  
Day 7: Lamentations 5:1-22

stakes. The Assyrians kept meticulous count of the number of cities they destroyed and the persons they killed. Their art shows scribes tabulating decapitated heads or piles of right hands. Thus, when Assyria began to lose her grip on subject states, moves toward freedom erupted everywhere.

In Jeremiah's time King Josiah asserted Judah's independence. He carried out radical religious and political reforms and moved to re-establish some of the glory and territory of the old state of David and Solomon. From about 625 to 610 B.C. Josiah was successful. Egypt and Babylonia engaged in a power struggle to fill the vacuum left by Assyria's demise. The Egyptians killed Josiah in 609 B.C. at the battle of Megiddo.

With Josiah's death the light of Judean independence flickered and went out. In turn Judah was subject first to Egypt and then to Babylonia. As a Babylonian subject, Judah again longed for independence. Relying on Egyptian promises of aid, Judah and other states rebelled.

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem twice. The first time was March 15, 597 B.C.—an exact date we know from Babylonian records. At that time the Babylonians spared Jerusalem, and they deported only the royal family and the upper classes. The second revolt and capture of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. turned Judah into a bloodbath and the city into a bonfire. Again leading citizens were exiled.

After the destruction of Jerusalem, a band of rebels murdered Gedaliah, the governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar. Despite Jeremiah's counsel to remain in the land, the rebels fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah and his secretary with them.

With this background we now turn to the Book of Jeremiah. We can divide the book into four major sections. Chapters 1 to 25 are primarily prophecies and proclamations against Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem. Chapters 26 to 45 are biographical narra-

tives about Jeremiah, which contain several prophecies. Chapters 46 to 51 are Jeremiah's speeches denouncing foreign nations. The final chapter, Chapter 52, is a historical narrative about the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of Judean citizens.

We find most of Jeremiah's prophetic preaching in Chapters 1 to 25. Chapters 1 to 6 appear to contain preaching from the time of King Josiah.

Jeremiah 1:4-10 records the call of Jeremiah. It is a conversation between the prophet and the Lord. Read these verses for the answers to the following questions.

a. Four words in verse 5 record actions of God. List them below.

b. Why did Jeremiah object to God's call?

c. How did the Lord respond to Jeremiah's objection?

d. How will Jeremiah both destroy and build?

## **JEREMIAH 2-6**

Chapter 1 gives the account of Jeremiah's call. Apparently he becomes a prophet at an early age. He complains that



**Babylonian king (left) and vassal**

he is only a youth despite God's assurance that he was destined to be a prophet before he was born. Jeremiah finally accepts his commission, realizing that his task is both to tear down and to build up. He knows his career will mean isolation and loneliness.

In Chapters 2 through 6 Jeremiah's preaching has two primary emphases. First, he condemns Judah for her worship of many gods and for her devotion to idolatrous religious practices. Jeremiah describes the people as an unfaithful bride who becomes an international prostitute, cavorting with Egypt and Assyria in infidelity and worshiping pagan gods on every high hill and under every green tree. Read Jeremiah 3:6-7.

Second, in these early prophecies Jeremiah proclaims that an enemy from the north is on the move to bring destruction to

Judah and Jerusalem. Although he does not identify this foe from the north, he probably was speaking of the Chaldeans. Apparently Jeremiah made these prophecies early in the reign of Josiah—before the king's attempts to reform the nation's religion were under way.

1. Jeremiah 5:15-19 describes the foe from the north. Read the passage, and list below five characteristics of that nation.

a. (5:15)

b. (5:15)

c. (5:15)

d. (5:15)

e. (5:16)

2. What five threats against Jeremiah's people are mentioned in 5:17?

a.

b.

- c.
- d.
- e.

### **JEREMIAH 7-20**

After the death of Josiah at Megiddo, Josiah's son Jehoahaz II succeeds him. However, the Egyptians remove him from the throne and replace Jehoahaz with another of Josiah's sons whom they call Jehoiakim. Chapters 7 through 20 of the book are best seen against the time of King Jehoiakim who reigns from 609 to 597 B.C.

Jeremiah considers Jehoiakim to be totally incompetent, extravagant, and pompous. He is quite a contrast to his father, Josiah. Jehoiakim spends much of his reign building a palace in a Jerusalem suburb. Jeremiah chastises Jehoiakim for this indulgence. Read Jeremiah 22:13-14.

In addition to the condemnation of the king, Chapters 7 to 20 contain many emphases not found in Chapters 1 to 6. In Chapter 7 the prophet condemns the people for believing that God will not destroy the city of Jerusalem simply because the Temple is there. According to Chapter 26 the priests and prophets of the Temple charge Jeremiah with treason for this sermon. But those who judge the case release him because Micah, an earlier prophet, had preached similarly without being executed.

In Chapters 7 to 20 Jeremiah symbolically acts out the coming destruction of Jerusalem. The most noteworthy of these symbols is in Chapter 19. Jeremiah buys a pottery jar and smashes it in public. As he

breaks the flask, Jeremiah proclaims these words: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it shall never be mended." For such preaching, Pashhur, the priest, beats Jeremiah and puts him in the stocks.

In Chapters 7 to 20 Jeremiah often complains to God. He laments over his life and calling. Many of his words remind us of Job's complaints. The following two passages give the tone of Jeremiah's complaints. Read Jeremiah 20:7. Here Jeremiah complains that God deceived him. Also read Jeremiah 20:14-15, where Jeremiah laments the day of his birth.

One of Jeremiah's symbolic acts is recorded in Jeremiah 13:1-11. Read the passage, and answer these questions.

- a. What did the linen loincloth symbolize?
- b. With what two evils did the Lord charge the people?

### **JERAMIAH 21-31**

Much in Chapters 21 to 25 comes from the time of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. During his reign, Jeremiah advises the king not to rebel against Babylonia; and after rebellion breaks out, Jeremiah counsels surrender to the foreigners as the will of God.

Chapters 26 to 45 describe numerous episodes in the life of the prophet Jeremiah. These chapters were partially written by Baruch who functioned as Jeremiah's secretary. Like the prophet Isaiah—who went around Jerusalem unclothed for three and one-half years—Jeremiah pickets and demonstrates to get his word across.

According to Chapters 27 and 28 he wears an ox yoke to demonstrate that the Judeans will be placed under the Babylonian yoke.

In Chapter 29 Jeremiah writes letters to

those taken into exile. He advises them to settle down and not to expect a return home during their lifetime. On numerous occasions persons imprison Jeremiah or keep him under house arrest.

After Jerusalem fell the Babylonians gave Jeremiah special treatment. This action probably convinced many of his contemporaries that he was a traitor all along. Although the Babylonians gave him freedom to settle where he wished, Jeremiah chose to remain with those left in the land of Canaan.

The Book of Jeremiah is not totally pessimistic. Many passages speak about the good future to come, a new day after the coming judgment of God. The prophet's preaching shows that he not only expects a new day to dawn but he also believes the new day will see a new humanity that is faithful to God and the Law. The new age will be characterized by a new covenant and a new way of life. Read Jeremiah 31:33-34.

The letter of Jeremiah to the exiles is found in Chapter 29. Verses 10-14 contain a message of hope. Read Jeremiah 29:10-14 and answer these questions.

- a. What did the Lord plan to do for the exiles?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. After the return to Jerusalem, how will the people respond to the Lord?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. How will the Lord respond when found by the people?

## **LAMENTATIONS**

This hope of the new covenant seems to be set aside as we move into the Book of Lamentations. The Greek version of the Old Testament associates the Book of Lamentations with Jeremiah. The Hebrew Bible does not. This association probably resulted from the fact that 2 Chronicles 35:25 mentions the fact that Jeremiah uttered a lament for Josiah.

The five poems in the Book of Lamentations express the sense of loss and despair that characterized the people after the destruction of Jerusalem. They bemoan the fate of the city while recognizing that God destroyed it as an act of judgment in accordance with his word. Read Lamentations 1:1-2.

The first four poems in Lamentations are alphabetical. The first line or first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second verse begins with the second letter, and so on through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Book of Lamentations was later used in worship services on the anniversary of Jerusalem's destruction.

Read Lamentations 3:19-26, and answer these questions.

- a. In the midst of affliction, why does the poet have hope?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. To what kind of person is the Lord good?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. What should a person in distress do?

d. What is the subject of the Book of Lamentations?

## SUMMARY

Like the prophet Isaiah, Jeremiah made a significant contribution to Israelite prophecy. The most important parts of this prophetic book are listed here.

- (1) God's call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1)
- (2) Jeremiah's prophecies about the foe from the north (Jeremiah 2–16)
- (3) Jeremiah's predictions about the destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 17–20)
- (4) The prophet's hope for the new covenant (Jeremiah 31)

The Book of Lamentations is important for its portrayal of the people's grief over the loss of Jerusalem.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Jeremiah was strengthened in his life by the promise of God's sustaining power. Read Jeremiah 1:18-19. However, Jeremiah knew suffering. He was beaten and put in the stocks (20:2-3), imprisoned (37:15), and cast into a slimy cistern (38:6). Through forty years God saved Jeremiah from destruction even though he was under attack. God protected him not for the sake of Jeremiah but so that he could fulfill God's purpose in life, to preach God's word. What is the relationship between God's promise to Jeremiah and the suffering he experienced? What instruction for our Christian experience comes from Jeremiah?

2. Jerusalem had been besieged but not captured in over three hundred years. The Judeans considered Israel in error for breaking away from the rule of the Davidic dynasty. Perhaps they thought that the end of the kingdom of Israel a century earlier was because of God's anger with Israel, but that God protected Judah and Jerusalem at that time. So the Judeans had a superstitious belief that God would not allow Jerusalem to be destroyed because the Temple was there. The prophet refers to this belief in his great Temple sermon. Read Jeremiah 7:1-15. Why might the people have held this belief? Why was it in error? What are some examples of unfounded superstitions today? Share these examples with the group. How can we learn to let go of such superstitions?

3. On several occasions, Jeremiah uses symbolic actions—such as smashing a clay pot in public (Chapter 19) and wearing an ox yoke (Chapters 27–28)—to get his message across. In both political and religious life today, persons perform symbolic actions. What examples can you think of? What is the value of such symbolic actions?

4. Lamentations 1:7-12 gives a brief glimpse at the misery of a destroyed Jerusalem. To what do the images of nakedness and skirts refer? What is the grievous sin? Read Lamentations 3:19-33. What are the images of hope?

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## DAILY READINGS FOR EZEKIEL

- Day 1: Ezekiel 1:1-14  
Day 2: Ezekiel 2:1-10  
Day 3: Ezekiel 4:1-17  
Day 4: Ezekiel 19:1-14  
Day 5: Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Day 6: Ezekiel 40:1-16  
Day 7: Ezekiel 47:1-12