

Jeremiah

God Only Has Us: The Story of the Prophet Jeremiah

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In every generation there are people chosen by God to speak for God. Sometimes that is a mutual decision, but the most authentic prophets usually wrestle with their calling. Six hundred years before Jesus lived, an unusual boy was born. He was one of those children in whom, right away, people recognized an old soul. From his earliest years Jeremiah loved God and sought God for conversations. The more Jeremiah grew fascinated by learning about God, the more Jeremiah recognized that God needed him to tell the people things no one else could see. Jeremiah came to believe that God was calling him to be a prophet. Like Moses and Samuel before him, and all the genuine prophets, he questioned God's plan for his life. He was not sure that he wanted the role God had chosen for him – to be God's spokesperson. Over time, as he continued to develop this conversation with God, Jeremiah grew more confident that he knew what God needed him to say and do.

You might imagine that being so close to God would make your life easy, but in fact it set Jeremiah apart from other people. His was not an easy life. Jeremiah often found himself in the middle, even stuck between God and the people. At times he was so unpopular that he was attacked by his own brothers, the recipient of death threats, placed in the stocks by the king, and left in a cistern. Yet through it all Jeremiah tried hard to convey God's wishes. Sometimes he was hard on the people of Israel. At other times Jeremiah thought that God was being too demanding and he even wrestled with God.

Jeremiah developed a series of metaphors to illustrate God's intentions. Once he walked around the city with a yoke on his head to make a point. Another time when a foreign army was encroaching, Jeremiah bought real estate in Jerusalem to show the people there was nothing to fear.

Jeremiah reminded the people how much God loved them, how heartsick God was then they forgot about God. He explained that when God led Moses and the people out of Egypt there was a different kind of connection between God and the people. The people's faith in God was so strong that it felt like a relationship between lovers. When God was parting the Red Sea and sending manna everyday so they would not starve, their need for God was undisputed. When they were searching for a place to live and God was guiding them to the Promised Land, they asked for God's strength at every turn in battle. But they were settled now. The sense of urgency about where to live or how to survive had long since passed. The memories of those days were now centuries old. With prosperity came a different view of faith. Sometimes it was hard to remember God or how God had rescued them originally and given them the land they lived on.

Jeremiah tried to tell the people that they were in danger of losing their relationship with God. The Hebrews cared more about fitting in than about standing out as people of faith. Some experimented with their neighbor's gods and flirted with worshipping the statues and idols of the region. Over time God felt more and more like a jilted lover.

Not long after Jeremiah started to preach and teach, one of the priests in the Temple found a very old edition of the Book of Deuteronomy; everyone thought this discovery was a sign from God and with the discovery came a renewed fervor for devotion. The people started to pray regularly and worship more often. Israel prospered. But the Jewish homeland was unable to maintain its strength in the face of attacks from stronger neighbors.

It is never easy to know, in any country at any era, whether your nation's misfortune is tied to God's displeasure, or whether your success is a sign of God's favor. But the Hebrews interpreted life's twists and turns in light of their theology. In fact, many countries today still do.

Today looking back at the successful reign of King David, many historians attribute the unification of Israel as much to the luck of four decades when their neighbors were relatively weak, or distracted. But the Hebrews assumed that when David united the land inhabited by the Twelve Tribes of Israel, it was because God was rewarding them. Later when the tribal lands were overrun by foreigners, it all happened because God was punishing them. Given Israel's location, squeezed between Egypt to the South and Assyria and Babylon to the North, it did not take long for Israel's neighbors to flex their muscles. Israel fell apart seven hundred years before Jesus lived. 120 years before Jeremiah lived, the Hebrews had watched in horror as the Assyrians came from the north and took all the people from the tribes of Reuben, Manasseh and Gad – whole villages of extended families forcing them into exile in Assyria, where their Hebrew culture and identity was assimilated into Assyria. The Hebrews were horrified to watch as everything that distinguished them as a people melted away into oblivion. So when Egyptians mounted an offensive and invaded the Southern portion of Israel everyone was terrified that this would be the end of the Promised Land. When Egypt demanded taxes, the people gladly paid the tribute in exchange for remaining in their homes.

Many astute Israelites could see the country was crumbling but it was Jeremiah who explained the military debacle in religious terms. He told the people that God was like a husband with two wives. The wife in the South had been faithful but the wife in the North had cheated. Her punishment was that she was destroyed. The loss of the northern tribes was a warning to those who remained in the South.

Though he talked tough, Jeremiah was scared himself. After the devastation of the Northern tribes, he pleaded with God, arguing that nothing the Hebrews did could warrant the destruction of their beloved home, their Promised Land. God argued that Israel was nothing without faith. Their religion was what made them who

they were. Before long, Jeremiah saw the writing on the wall and spoke of the impending doom. Now the priests in the Temple were growing impatient with Jeremiah's depressing harangues about all the failures of the people of faith. The priests wanted to punish him or at least silence him, so that put him in prison without food, but the King sympathized with the prophet and released him. It was a hard time for Jeremiah; when time proved his dire predictions to be true, it was small comfort.

King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian, came down from the North to conquer what was left of Israel – the tribes in the South - and set up a puppet government in Jerusalem. Like the Assyrians, the Babylonians took the leaders of the Southern kingdom and forced them to re-locate in Babylon. Jeremiah could see that the only hope for Israel was to try to get along with the puppet government. But the priests told the people to rebel, and the Hebrews stubbornly refused to be docile. Finally the Babylonians lost their patience with the Jewish rebellions and sent armies to set up a blockade around the holy city. Jeremiah counselled surrender, but the people put him in prison without food or water.

In 587 BCE the Babylonians burned Jerusalem to the ground and left a new governor in charge of the remnant of Hebrews. The people realized Jeremiah had been right, but they were angry and confused. They forced Jeremiah to accompany them on a foolhardy journey to Egypt. But Jeremiah was elderly and could not make the trip, so he died along the way.

What can we learn from the story of the life of Jeremiah? One of the greatest prophets in Jewish and Christian history lived in a difficult time of change and decay.

In the first place, all societies and nations need prophets. Jeremiah had the thankless task of speaking his truth when no one wanted to hear it. Yet, he did what God wanted. He said things people did not want to hear, but Israel was stronger because of his message.

We need men and women who see things differently, because they force us all to think. We need folks who are willing to speak the truth no matter how unpopular they are. We need people who will say things that we don't want to hear, but that may hold a vision of the way forward. Among our country's greatest gifts is freedom of speech. When the founders of this nation reflected on the history of Europe they were persuaded that free speech actually strengthens the civic debate and makes a country strong. Only totalitarian governments and insecure leaders fear the voices of dissent.

Israel established this precedent thousands of years ago by honoring its prophets and the prophetic tradition. It is harder to allow for open public debate. Not only is it hard to be a prophet, it is hard to listen to one. Most of us get tired of the people who say that they know what is best, or who predict the worse, or who say that they know what God would want our nation to do.

Many of the leading voices in the environmental movement have had to fight to be heard. Vice President Al Gore traded his reputation as a senator and statesman to be a whistle blower for the earth. He might have chosen an easier path or more popular cause, but decided to be a prophet for climate change and he has paid a price for it. But his voice has made a difference. Another modern prophet, Aung San Suu Kyi, is a tireless advocate for democracy in Burma. A survivor of constant threats and oppression, she spent 15 years under house arrest or prison. Prophets pay dearly for their courage, but our lives are all enriched by them. The world is a better place because of the prophets among us.

Finally, most people do not see the results of their labors. I imagine Jeremiah felt frustrated, alone and discouraged right to the end of his life, because his was a thankless job. He died never realizing that 25 centuries later people would still admire his courage, and would study his words. His life teaches us that most of us cannot gauge the impact of our deeds. We don't see the ripple effect of our efforts for good. We love our children and never know how much they appreciate our example, or our integrity or our values. We help a colleague and never know when our kindness makes a real difference. We speak up at family gatherings but

never know the impact of our opinions, or see how much other family members may appreciate what we have said. We don't know how many other people rely on our ideas. We go along and do our best but never see what God sees.