

Session Six

Jeremiah: The Broken-Hearted Prophet



Fresco of prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel by Leopold Bruckner, Saint Nicholas Church, Trnava, Slovakia

A. Establish the Context

In the previous session, we explored Isaiah's words of hope to the exiles following the destruction of the Temple and the holy city of Jerusalem. We also saw how these same words provide hope to us today as we await the "new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). In this session, we are taken to "ground level" to witness the events leading up to the Babylonian exile and the destruction of Jerusalem through the experience of an eyewitness, Jeremiah. Jeremiah's ministry spans more than four decades, from 627 BC until about 580 BC. (Locate this period on your *Bible Timeline Chart*.) It is a volatile time, as the regional powers of Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon fight for domination, and the fragile kingdom of Judah struggles to survive in the middle. Repeated attempts by the kingdom of Judah to ally itself with Egypt in hopes of escaping Babylonian rule will bring down a series of crippling attacks from the northern superpower, each ending in the deportation of more people to Babylon (see the three blue arrows on your Chart). The last expulsion in 587 BC will be painfully united to the final ruination of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Davidic throne.

In the decades prior to these events, Jeremiah faithfully conveys God's Word to the people, to the religious authorities, and to the kings who reign over Judah during this time. Despite Jeremiah's warnings, the people rest dangerously on the false hope that God will never allow the Temple to be destroyed. They may have ears, but they refuse to hear God's Word. Jeremiah is rejected by his own people, even threatened with death. Yet he cannot remain silent. He says that God's Word is like "a burning fire shut up in my bones" (Jeremiah 20:9).

Given all of this, it is not surprising that Jeremiah is remembered as the "weeping prophet." His suffering and rejection begin to embody the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and foreshadow the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the person of Jesus Christ. Despite the dark days that Jeremiah lives through, he is also a prophet of hope. Like the prophets before him, he enacts living parables that become signs of restoration. From jail, as Jerusalem is surrounded and its destruction is certain, Jeremiah is instructed by God to purchase some real estate. This is after he has predicted a seventy-year exile! With this purchase comes a prophecy: "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jeremiah 32:15). Jeremiah's purchase is a supreme act of hope for Judah. It is the end of an era, but not the end of the story.

The chapters of Jeremiah are not arranged chronologically. Instead, narrative and historic sections are mixed with oracles and prophetic poems that offer a window into Jeremiah's heart and soul.

The following chart shows where key events in Jeremiah's life and ministry fall in relation to historic events and the reigns of the kings of Judah. (Locate the kings on your *Bible Timeline Chart*.)

TIMELINE (BC) AND RULING KING OF JUDAH	VERSES IN JEREMIAH THAT TAKE PLACE DURING EACH KING'S REIGN
640–609 – Josiah	1:1–19 3:6–6:30
609 – Jehoahaz 609–598 – Jehoiakim	7:1–34 25:1–26:24 35:1–36:32 45:1–48:47
598–597 – Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) 597–586 – Zedekiah	20:1–22:30 24:1–10 27:1–33:22 37:1–39:18 49:1–52:34
587 and following – After the exile of Zedekiah and destruction of the Temple	40:1–44:30, 52:1–34

B. Read the Story

In order to get the historical context, begin by reading 2 Kings 22–24. Then read Jeremiah 1–2, 7, 29:1–14, 31–33 to get a feel for the prophet's message. Locate Jeremiah on your *Bible Timeline Chart*.

Going Deeper (optional): To get the entire story and message of this prophet, read the entire book of Jeremiah. The following outline may help you keep your bearings.

Jeremiah 1–10	Warning of judgment due to the broken covenant
Jeremiah 11–29	Jeremiah's struggles
Jeremiah 30–33	Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation"; the New Covenant to come and future restoration for Judah and Israel
Jeremiah 34–45	Judgment on Judah
Jeremiah 46–51	Judgment on the nations
Jeremiah 52	Conclusion: the fall of Jerusalem and exile

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you do not understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the small-group discussion.

KINGS OF JUDAH IN THE TIME OF JEREMIAH (2 KINGS 22–24)

1. It has been nearly a century since Israel's fall to Assyria, and Samaria is under foreign control. Jeremiah preaches to Judah, the Southern Kingdom, during the reigns of kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. Locate them on your *Bible Timeline Chart*; then read the following and record briefly what you learn about their reigns.
 - a. Josiah – Judah's last faithful king
 - 2 Kings 22:1-2:
 - 2 Kings 23:1-5, 23:21-30 (after Josiah has the Temple repaired and the book of the Law is found in it):
 - b. Jehoiakim
 - 2 Kings 23:34-37:
 - 2 Kings 24:1-2:
 - c. Zedekiah
 - 2 Kings 24:17–25:12:

JEREMIAH'S CALL AND MESSAGE (JEREMIAH 1–2)

2. Jeremiah 1 tells how Jeremiah is called to be a prophet. Read Jeremiah 1:1-5.
 - a. What four things does God tell Jeremiah about his calling?
 - b. Compare this to Isaiah 44:1-2, 49:1-6 (the call of the servant) and Galatians 1:15-16 (the call of St. Paul). What do they have in common?

3. Read Jeremiah 1:7-9. Jeremiah's initial response is to object on the basis of his youth and ignorance. How does God reply?
4. In Jeremiah 1:10, 1:15-19, God outlines Jeremiah's job description and the challenges he will face. What are the two opposite aspects of his role, and how will God help him accomplish them?
5. In the following passages, what does Jeremiah's response in prayer to difficult circumstances reveal about the struggle within his heart?
 - Jeremiah 17:14-18:
 - Jeremiah 20:7-18:
6. In Jeremiah 2, the prophet is called to plead for repentance in the streets of Jerusalem.
 - a. Read Jeremiah 2:9-13. What are the two great evils that Judah is charged with? Explain the metaphor Jeremiah uses to make them clear.
 - b. What are some of the leaky, inadequate "cisterns" we try to use to replace God in our lives?

JEREMIAH IN THE TEMPLE

The people of Judah see the Temple in Jerusalem as their "ace in the hole"; since God is present there, they count on it as a type of magical protection against any and all enemies. They place their trust, then, in a building made of stone, rather than on a life built on covenant faithfulness. As we will see, their trust is misplaced.

7. Read Jeremiah 7.
 - a. What are some of the sins of Judah that are outlined here?

- b. The people of Judah may think Israel is destroyed only because it lacks the protection of the Temple. What historical event does Jeremiah recall to illustrate the folly of their belief? (See Jeremiah 7:12-15.)

- 8. **New Testament Connection:** Read Matthew 21:12-13, where Jesus quotes both Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. How does the context of the quote from Jeremiah give deeper meaning to Jesus' words? (Read also CCC 584.)

A FUTURE AND A HOPE (JEREMIAH 29-33)

In the course of his reign, King Jehoiakim wavers in his alliance between Egypt and Babylon with the result that twice Babylon invades Judah and takes captives to Babylon: first in 605 BC and then in 597 BC. Jehoiakim dies before facing this second invasion, and his son Jehoiachin is left to bear the brunt of his actions. After reigning for just three months, Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah; see Matthew 1:12), the Queen Mother, his officials, and all but the poorest people are taken into exile. In addition, all the treasures of the Temple and the palace are taken away.

- 9. During this time, false prophets fill the air with claims that the exiles will be home soon from Babylon and all will be well. God sends a different message to the exiles through Jeremiah. Read Jeremiah 29:1-14 before going on. (In the RSV-2CE, "Jeconiah" in Jeremiah 29:2 is another name for Jehoiachin.)
 - a. How are the exiles to live? Why? (See Jeremiah 29:4-9.)
 - b. The "why" of God's instructions becomes clearer in Jeremiah 29:10-14. What hope does he give them?
- 10. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah has a "Book of Consolation." Jeremiah 30-33 is the "heart" of Jeremiah, full of beautiful words of restoration and hope, speaking of future days alluded to in Jeremiah's call—when, after uprooting and breaking down, God will watch over, build, and plant his people once again (see Jeremiah 1:10 and 31:28).
 - a. God is faithful to his covenant promise, but how can God be faithful given that his people have broken the covenant? Read Jeremiah 31:31-37.

b. Explain what God will do for his people (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

c. How sure is this promise (Jeremiah 31:35-37)?

11. This promised “New Covenant” is something truly new. No amount of animal blood can atone for the sins of Israel. The breaking of the covenant requires the death of one of the parties. In God’s mercy, he will send his own Son to take on Israel’s sins—to become Israel, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, in order to atone for its sins.¹

Read the following passages, and explain what you learn about this “New Covenant” foretold by Jeremiah.

- Luke 22:19-20:
- CCC 781:
- CCC 613:
- CCC 1965:

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the session to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

We have seen into Jeremiah’s heart in the way he prays in the midst of difficult and confusing circumstances. What about God’s designs do you find hard to understand? Is there something you are going through that you think is difficult to bring to God in prayer? Choose one of Jeremiah’s prayers from question 5. Rewrite it below to fit your situation, and offer it up to the Father.

Dear Lord ...

¹ See Romans 9:15-22.

SESSION SIX TALK NOTES

Jeremiah: The Broken-Hearted Prophet**I. Setting the Stage**

- A. Background
- B. “The weeping prophet”
 - 1. At deafness of people
 - 2. Jeremiah drawn into the pathos of God, experiences rejection
 - 3. Commanded not to marry as a visible sign of their loss
 - 4. Baruch – Jeremiah’s secretary

II. The Call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1)

- A. Three verbs describe God’s work with Jeremiah
 - 1. Known (*yadah*) before he was formed in womb
 - a. Intimate knowledge
 - b. Present tense indicates instantaneous, complete knowing
 - 2. Consecrated (*qadash*, “to set apart, make holy”)
 - 3. Appointed
 - a. Jonah – God appointed the whale
 - b. Commissioned with a mission
 - 4. All these are true of us
 - 5. These give confidence
- B. Jeremiah’s “job description” (Jeremiah 1:9-10, 1:18)
 - 1. God’s words in his mouth
 - 2. Set against nations ... to pluck up and break down
 - 3. I will make you “a fortified city” against the land (Jeremiah 1:18)
 - 4. “Be not afraid,” “I am with you” (“bookends” Jeremiah 1:8, 1:19)

III. Charges Against the People (Jeremiah 2)

- A. Broken covenant, idolatry, injustice, hollow religion
- B. Bride-bridegroom language (Jeremiah 2:1-3)

- C. Analogy of the cistern (Jeremiah 2:13) – two great evils
 - 1. They have forsaken God, the fountain of living water
 - 2. They have built broken cisterns that hold no water
 - a. Idolizing themselves and the work of their hands
 - b. Seeking to fill the void in life. Pope Francis:²
 - i. “The opposite of faith is ... idolatry”
 - ii. “Idols exist ... as a pretext for setting ourselves at the center of reality and worshiping the work of our own hands. Once man has lost the fundamental orientation [toward God] which unifies his existence, he breaks down into the multiplicity of his desires”
 - c. *Diabolos*, diabolical (“to scatter”)
 - d. In contrast, God brings wholeness, integrity
 - i. *Shalom*, “nothing missing, nothing broken”
 - e. Result: ever thirsting, never satisfied
 - f. A call to spiritual vigilance
 - D. The people presume on the Temple for protection (Jeremiah 7)
 - 1. Fail to understand need for covenant faithfulness
 - 2. Violate commandments while expecting deliverance (Jeremiah 7:9-10)
 - 3. The Temple has “become a den of robbers” (Jeremiah 7:11)
 - a. Quoted by Jesus (Matthew 21:13)
 - b. Jesus unites this with Isaiah 56:7, the Temple as a house of prayer for the nations
 - c. Jesus cleanses the Temple: a prophetic sign of what will happen to it because of their infidelity
 - E. Burning children in sacrifice (Jeremiah 7:30-31)
 - 1. Hinnom Valley – later a burning garbage dump, “Gehenna”
 - 2. Analogy of eternal separation from God
 - F. The people ignore Jeremiah’s warnings, destruction is assured
- IV. From Destruction, Comes Hope**
- A. Jeremiah’s “Book of Consolation” (Jeremiah 30–33)
 - B. A letter to the exiles: God has a “return policy” (Jeremiah 29:10-14)
 - C. Joy in future return (Jeremiah 31:13)

² *Lumen Fidei* 13.

- D. Prediction of messianic age, New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33)
 - 1. Israel and Judah together
 - 2. Law on hearts, not on stone
 - 3. I will be their God, they will be my people
- E. The New Covenant is Jesus (recall Isaiah 42)
 - 1. Pope Benedict XVI – hope as the distinguishing mark of Christians³
- F. Jeremiah purchases property: a sign of hope (Jeremiah 32)
 - 1. However bad it looks, God has a plan
 - 2. The Eucharist as a pledge of our hope

V. **Conclusion: Prayer of Renewal⁴**

³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 2.

⁴ For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.

Prophets of the Exile (722–538 BC)

INTRODUCTION TO SESSIONS SEVEN AND EIGHT

The Divided Kingdom came to an end for the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in 722 BC because Israel failed to heed God's plea through the prophets to return to him and his covenant. As we have seen, Israel was conquered by Assyria. Most of the people were taken into exile. They were resettled among other nations conquered by Assyria, and populations from those nations were moved into Israel. Although Judah remained intact in the south, the ten tribes of Israel in the north were no more.

Eventually, Assyria was conquered by Babylon. Under King Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon deported many of the residents of Judah in three waves starting in 605 BC. The third (and final) deportation in 587 BC was marked by destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Both the exile of Israel and the Babylonian captivity of Judah had been foretold by the prophets who warned the people of the consequence of turning their hearts from God. **Now, God sends prophets to speak to the people of Judah in captivity.** Find Daniel, Baruch, and Ezekiel on *The Bible Timeline Chart* in the baby blue period of the Exile, at the top of the blue arrows representing the three deportations of Judah.

We will spend two sessions in the time of the Exile studying Ezekiel and Daniel.