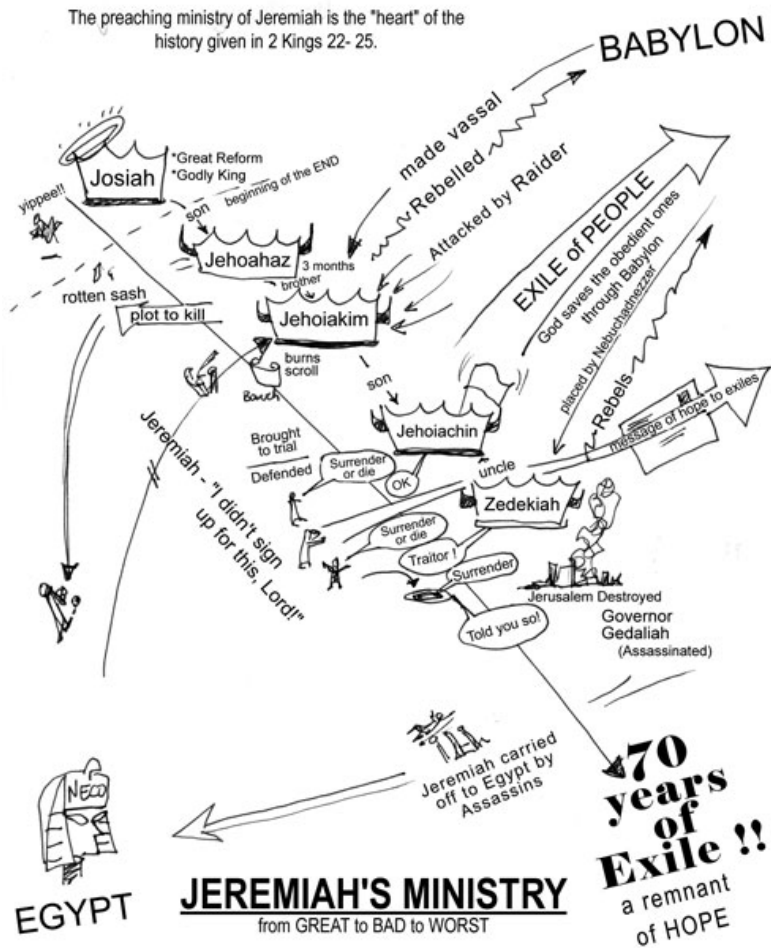


# Jeremiah

## Week 1

The preaching ministry of Jeremiah is the "heart" of the history given in 2 Kings 22- 25.



**Monday:** Jeremiah 13-19

**Tuesday:** Jeremiah 20-24

**Wednesday:** Jeremiah 25-29

**Thursday:** Jeremiah 30-33

**Friday:** Jeremiah 34-38

## Introduction

### The Slippery Slope of Jerusalem's Last Days

For many people to speak the word “history” is to speak a nasty word. Unfortunately, much to the nation’s demise and the teachers disgrace, many history teachers reduced the teaching of history to dry, boring data. It was nothing more than dates, names, and meaningless maps. I was one of the lucky ones. In high school I had a teacher for AP World History who knew how to make history come alive. One of the ways he did this was to assign novels for us to read alongside the history textbook. During our study of the French Revolution we read A Tale of Two Cities. During WWI we read All’s Quiet on the Western Front. He knew the secret. History is literature, art, romance, passion, intrigue...history is life!! By reading stories from the period, we were able to smell the air, hear the sounds, and feel the emotions of the real-life people who lived through these epochs of time.

For many people, the study of the Old Testament can be a similarly dry experience as that of the boring history class. As we worked our way through 2 Kings earlier this year it became tedious and boring for many to listen to the list of kings being rattled

off in rapid succession. That is why we have books like Jeremiah. If this was my high school teacher's history class, and he was teaching us the history text of 2 Kings, he would have had us read Jeremiah and Lamentations. Jeremiah is the story and the emotion of the book of 2 Kings. You will want to refer back to 2 Kings 22 – 25 while you are reading this book to try to keep the kings straight in your mind.

Jeremiah was a prophet who began his preaching ministry during the heyday of **Josiah's** spiritual reformation and watched the nation slide down a slippery slope of wickedness that eventually ended in the total annihilation of the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah's story is one of both encouragement and discouragement. On the surface it may appear to be nothing more than discouraging. His ministry went from GREAT to BAD to WORST POSSIBLE SCENARIO. Typically we like stories to move the other direction. We like the stories where the hero starts off in a bad place and misunderstood and fights against the odds, battling evil and injustice, until he finally prevails, justice is served, and they all live happily ever after.

Jeremiah's story is just the opposite. He starts off in ministry preaching during the reign of **Josiah**. King Josiah was the one who was appalled by what his evil grandfather Manasseh had done and spent his career rebuilding the Temple, tearing down all the pagan idols and altars, and retraining the people to obey the Law of Moses. What preacher would not enjoy that scenario? The king asked him to go up and down the streets telling the people to repent and get right with God. The young preacher Jeremiah must have strutted with confidence during this early preaching. After all, he had the king and the king's army backing up his message!

Then Josiah died and it was the beginning of the end. The chart shows the succession of kings that followed Josiah and the various, and increasingly difficult, levels of interaction Jeremiah had with these rulers. In three months time **Jehoahaz** reintroduced all the paganism of his great grandfather Manasseh. Jeremiah called, “foul” and accused Jehoahaz and all his people of stinking like a rotten loincloth (by the way, not a good idea if you want to be “in” with the powers that be). There was a plot to kill Jeremiah after that. Fortunately for Jeremiah, Jehoahaz was quickly captured by the Pharaoh of Egypt and taken into captivity. Pharaoh Neco placed Jehoahaz’s half brother **Jehoiakim** on the throne in Jerusalem as a puppet king. During Jehoiakim’s reign the world powers were shifting hands and his vassalship was taken out of the hands of the Egyptians and assumed by the Babylonians. From that point on Nebuchadnezzar was the clear and present danger for the city of Jerusalem.

During Jehoiakim’s reign Jeremiah did two things. First, he wrote down all his really juicy messages on a scroll and had his partner, Baruch, read it to the king. Basically, the message said, “The Lord is going to use Babylon to destroy you. If you want to repent, He’s ready to stop the process.” Jehoiakim took the scroll and burned each section right after Baruch read it. I don’t think he was clearly getting the point. From that point on Jeremiah’s life became a game of cat and mouse with the kings of Judah. Jeremiah was brought to trial for treason and treachery, but there were still a few good men left in the city at this point that came to his aid.

The second thing Jeremiah did during this time was to complain. You’ll find interspersed amongst his messages of warning and woe to the king, the

occasional aside to God that goes something like this, “Excuse me Lord! I didn’t sign up for this. I liked the good old days with Josiah when my words had power. Now I speak what you ask and the people mock me, hate me, and try to seriously hurt me. Can I get off the ride now, I’d really like to go home.” Don’t blame him. I think I would have complained as well (as a matter of fact, I think I have whined like that a few times). In the end the Lord would remind him that all that is required of him is obedience... nothing more. God was not judging him based upon his audience approval or his “ratings.” God wanted nothing more than absolute surrender. This was a dark time for Jerusalem that wasn’t going to get better and somebody had to deliver the message.

After Jehioakim died, his son, **Jehoiachin**, took over. Even though he was evil like his father, Jehoichin did something right. Out of all the kings in this story, he was the only one who actually listened to Jeremiah. By this time God had already determined that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Yet, God took compassion on His people and offered a way out for those who would be willing to listen to the words of Jeremiah and obey. Jeremiah told the people to surrender to Babylon and God would spare their lives. “What! Surrender to the enemy?!? How could this be the word of God?” Well, it was. Now whether Jehoichin was actually a smart man and was willing to obey the word of God, or was just a plain coward and didn’t want to fight against Babylon is a question for debate. In either case, Jehoiachin did surrender to Nebby and was carried off to Babylon along with all the important people of the city and anyone who wanted to obey Jeremiah’s instructions. This is the actual beginning point of the Babylonian Exile.

Neb left behind Jehoiachin's uncle, **Zedekiah**, to be the puppet king over the stragglers left behind. Like many people who are placed in power, Zedekiah thought he was tougher than he was and decided to rebel against Babylon. Bad idea. During this part of the story things got really ugly for Jeremiah. The people hated him because they thought he was a traitor for telling everyone to surrender. Their hatred for him got him thrown into a few different kinds of prisons – a dungeon, courtyard confinement, and a mud-filled well. Zedekiah toyed with Jeremiah's emotions as he would have secret midnight consultations with the prophet, making Jeremiah think he might be willing to listen to God. In the end, he did not and ended up getting the entire city ransacked and completely razed to the ground, Temple and all.

Jeremiah stood there and watched his beautiful city -- the holy city of God, the city that was to shine like a light to the world demonstrating God's holiness and goodness – get burned to the ground, nothing more than a billowing plume of wretched smoke. Where were the good times with Josiah? Where was the hope? There are two answers to this question. In chapters 29 – 31 we have the record of a beautiful message of hope that Jeremiah sent to his brothers and sisters of Jerusalem that had been taken to Babylon. In that letter he told them not to be afraid. He said that God would care for them in Babylon and that He would use the time to heal the land until it was ready to start over. It is here that frames the context for the famous words, *“for I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

For the people there was hope, but for Jeremiah there was none. As he watched the smoke rise to

the sky and blot out the sun, moon, and stars, he penned the words of Lamentations and wept bitterly for his beloved city. Then he was caught up in another political mess as the governor of the region, **Gedaliah**, was assassinated by a band of rebels. These rebels grabbed Jeremiah and dragged him off to Egypt in order to escape the wrath of Babylon. That is the last we know of Jeremiah. Bummer.

How can this be a good story? Isn't the hero supposed to win? While these are natural reactions to a tragic story, I would like to highlight one fundamental flaw to this reaction. You see, the reason we want the hero to win, the reason we want our own lives to work out like the "good guy wins" movie, is because we think we are the hero. There's the flaw. We aren't the hero. The truth is that the hero does win in this story, it's just that Jeremiah wasn't him. Jeremiah was just the humble servant of the hero. The hero is Jesus. Jesus is the hero who ultimately wins the fight and gets the girl in the end (the church is his bride, remember). Jeremiah was, and we are, simply servants. We may be called to a glory lap in the long distance race of God's story, and that would be wonderful. However, we may also be called to a very difficult and treacherous leg of the race that ends in pain and obscurity. That was how all the apostles ended up. Thousands of great men and women have shared Jeremiah's story. Let's be sure that we don't get caught up in "hero worship" in the American church. "Success" takes on many faces in the game of God's will. All we need to worry about is staying focused on the master and being willing to obey, no matter the cost.

# Monday: A Preserving Agent

Jeremiah 5:1-2; Gen. 18:16-33; Matt. 5:13

Read Genesis 18:16-33. On what condition did God say He would spare Sodom and Gommorrah?

Read Jeremiah 5:1-2. What similarities do you see between this conversation between Jeremiah and the Lord and the conversation Abraham had with the Lord in Genesis 18?

What was the result of Jeremiah's search through the city of Jerusalem?

Read Matthew 5:13. What effect does salt have on things? Why do you suppose Jesus called His followers the salt of the earth?

Salt has two effects. It seasons and it preserves. In the old days, before refrigeration, salt was rubbed into meat to keep it from rotting. In many ways that is one of the major purposes for Christians in the world. A Christian presence in a community can be a positive influence that can keep the moral decay from accelerating too quickly.

Jeremiah didn't find any salt in the city of Jerusalem. As a result that city was destroyed. Let's remember that we are in our city for a purpose. We are to be salt to keep things from going downhill. And we are to be light to shine the truth and the hope of the gospel to a lost world.

Stay salty!

## Tuesday: True Boasting

Jeremiah 9:23-26

As you read through the first nine chapters of Jeremiah you realize that one of the biggest problems the people had was that they talked the talk, but they didn't walk the walk. They knew the right words to say that sounded "religious" or like they knew the truth about Jehovah, but they practiced idolatry right along with it. The really wild thing about it was that they boasted in how "tight" they were with God. They boasted in how holy Jerusalem was and how God had chosen them to be a special nation, and that the rich among them were especially close to God because He had so obviously blessed them.

Read Jeremiah 9:23-26. If a person is going to boast, what should they boast about?

List the qualities that describe God and that bring delight to His heart?

According to vv. 25-26, what kind of circumcision was God looking for?

Just because the men of Israel were physically circumcized, that did not make them right with God. That was the people's problem. They thought God was all about the externals; what you did on the outside and how you appeared to everyone. That was a dangerous path.

Now do a heart check on yourself. What standard do you use to feel good about yourself? Are you comparing yourself to beautiful people, or rich people, or "super-spiritual" people and deriving your sense of worth, or lack of worth, based upon the comparison? Remember that God does not care about these external things. God cares about the integrity of your heart. How are you doing in the kindness, justice, and righteousness department in your life?

## Wednesday: The Trust Factor

Jeremiah 17:5-10

This passage sets up a nice contrast for us.

Draw a table that has two columns. In the left column write "cursed trust vv. 5-6" and in the right column write "blessed trust vv. 7-8." List all the contrasts you see in these two passages.

According to v. 10, what is God looking for?

The obvious question from this lesson is, “where is your trust?” It is easy to pay lip service to the notion that we trust in the Lord, but what do our actions say? How much time do we spend protecting ourselves from danger – financial, relational, political – by putting up various types of walls around us, when all the while our heart is drying up for lack of love from and toward God. God invites us to open ourselves up and place our trust in Him, not our own strength or ingenuity. When we throw ourselves into God’s hands and stop worrying about things, then we can experience true freedom.

## Thursday: I Didn't Sign Up for This!

Jeremiah 20:7-18 is a beautiful picture of a real man having a heart to heart talk with God.

What is Jeremiah's attitude in this passage?

Why do you suppose he feels this way about God?

In vv. 7-8, what is the attitude of the citizens of Jerusalem toward Jeremiah?

According to v. 9, why can't Jeremiah keep his mouth shut?

In v. 10, what do the citizens want to do to Jeremiah?

What is the message of vv. 11-13?

In vv. 14-18, how does Jeremiah feel about himself? Why?

Sometimes even the people with the strongest faith, who are in the most difficult circumstances, have difficulty seeing the good in the situation. Jeremiah was honest with God. Yes, he knew the truth – we see that in vv. 11-13 – but it didn't make his situation feel any better.

God never promised you that life would be easy. Nor does God want you to pretend that it is. What God wants from you is an authentic heart that is not afraid to speak the truth in all circumstances, even if it means telling God that you are getting tired of being the only one who is willing to do what is right. God's big enough to handle your honesty. He invites it, and wants to carry your burden for you.

## Friday: A Message of Hope

Let's face it; Jeremiah's story is mostly a dark tale of destruction on a wicked city. During Jehoiachin's reign a massive amount of Jerusalemites surrendered to the Babylonians and were taken to exile. The people left behind were destined for annihilation. Jeremiah was left behind to continue speaking the words of God to these hard-hearted people. Things got ugly for Jeremiah as he was imprisoned and, at one point, thrown into a pit and left to die.

During this dark time Jeremiah took a moment and turned his attention to those who had been exiled. Read Jeremiah 29:1-23 to see what he said to these people.

In your own words, try to summarize the message of this passage.

Underline vv. 11-13 in your Bible. Do you see what is happening here? Even in the midst of the darkest hour, God gives a message of hope and faithfulness to His people. Yes, He punishes them for their sin, no doubt. Yet, God will never forget the promise He made to Abraham. God has a plan and that plan is bigger than anyone can imagine.

2500 years later we can see the plan clearly. In the middle of Babylonian captivity God was preparing the way for Jesus, the Messiah to come. I'm sure the Jews were having a hard time understanding how being in a detention camp was a good thing, but that is what Jeremiah said.

You may be in a difficult time right now. Don't despair. God is with you, He understands your suffering and has a big picture in mind. Just stay focused and keep your heart right with Him.