

MESSAGES FROM THE PROPHETS

Study 1

Jeremiah - God is True

Read

Jeremiah chapter 1

In our studies in the lives of the prophets we have already noted at least two vital factors in their work. Each man differed in personality, background and approach. Recognising this, we have seen how God makes use of the individuality of His servants, fitting into His plans the particular traits of their varying personalities. So we have thought of Isaiah the statesman, Amos, the herdsman and Hosea the family man. Our study in the prophets becomes fascinating as we keep these facts in mind.

When we look at the life of Jeremiah, we come to a different character again. Many Bible students have named him 'the weeping prophet'. This is no doubt due to the times in his ministry when, feeling deeply for the need of his nation, he was reduced to tears. Jeremiah was a priest from a village community at Anathoth, and came from a priestly family. His ministry was to the people in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and he laboured and lived in Jerusalem. But his task was not an easy one. Although his prophecy is rather long, it would be profitable to read it right through, for it contains some fine passages. Although the general picture is dark, there are some wonderful evidences of God's love and kindness to the nation, in spite of their sin.

First look at the CONDITIONS under which Jeremiah worked and lived. Josiah, the young king, was on the throne of Judah when the prophet began his ministry. (**Jeremiah 1: 2**) He saw many things happen which saddened him during those tragic days. Finally he witnessed the destruction of the sacred city, and the people carried away captive to Babylon. This occurred in about 586 B.C. Jeremiah remained faithful to the last and eventually ended his days with some of his own people in Egypt.

The religious condition of the people was marked by sinfulness and a turning away from God. They professed to adhere to the Temple and its worship, but this was just a sham and mere outward profession. God accused them of two great evils. "**For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns - broken cisterns that can hold no water.**" (**Jeremiah 2: 13**) In other words, they had deserted the God who was able to give them great joy and satisfaction, and they had turned instead to sources which left them empty and dissatisfied. How often are we like this? Christians should find all their joy and sustenance in the Lord Jesus. But all too often it is possible to turn to other pursuits and pleasures which do not satisfy.

The CALL of Jeremiah is most important. It tells us much about the MAN and his MISSION. The call came to him

while following his ordinary path of duty in Anathoth and completely changed his life. Notice **verse 5** of **chapter 1**. Can you imagine the surprise of the prophet when God told him that he was already known and marked out to be a prophet of the Lord. Jeremiah protests and hesitantly expressed his sense of inadequacy for such a task. But this does not alter God's intention. The prophet had to learn that God's command was also God's enabling. The WORD must be spoken - the TRUE WORD of God. God was going to send Jeremiah to His people with a vital message. This message would "**root out**", "**pull down**", "**destroy**", "**throw down**", "**build and plant**". (**verse 10**) Although Jeremiah felt his own complete unworthiness for the task, God would not take 'no' for an answer. The lesson is clear and plain for us. If God calls and commands, we must obey, whatever the cost.

What was the CHARACTER of Jeremiah's work? He had to be absolutely true, in contrast to all that was false around him. If you look at **chapter 23**, you will see WHY Jeremiah needed to be TRUE to the Word of God. In **verse 16** we find God speaking about those who spoke out of their OWN heart and not out of the mouth of the Lord. Notice this, for the Lord had to tell the people not to listen to such messages. They were full of lies and deceit, designed to make the nation forget their God. (**verses 26 & 27**) To Jeremiah was given the challenging word, "**He who has my word let him speak my word faithfully**". (**verse 28**) God was TRUE - His Word was TRUE - therefore His servant must be TRUE also.

Jeremiah fulfilled the character demanded of his mission and although he suffered, and was even put into a pit and imprisoned, yet he remained loyal to his God and to His Word. Are we like this? False teachings abound today and Christians have to make sure that first of all they KNOW the truth of God's Word, and then that they are ready to TELL the truth as they share it with others. Remember that there is only ONE ANSWER to ERROR - and that is the POSITIVE TRUTH.

What was the secret of Jeremiah's CONSTANCY? **Jeremiah 15: 16** provides this answer. "**Your words were found and I ate them; and your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart.**" Here is the secret of all faithfulness to God and to His Word. You must enjoy it for yourself. Just as you eat your food and enjoy its flavour and benefit by it, so you can come to the Bible each day and feed upon it. Do you enjoy your Bible? I suggest that you find a method which makes your reading interesting and instructive. Remember that successful Bible study is a DISCIPLINE. Give God time to speak to you and He will show you the TRUTH of His own Word. Then you will be able to tell others with conviction, as Jeremiah did, that GOD IS TRUE.

Study 2

Jonah - God is Patient

Read

Jonah chapters 1 - 4

There is possibly no more interesting a man among the prophets, than Jonah the son of Amittai. The story of his life is unique. Perhaps the only real fact that you remember about him is that a large fish swallowed him, but he miraculously lived to tell the tale! Jonah was a Jew with the privilege of belonging to God's chosen people. This set him apart from the wicked nations around him, such as the Assyrians, and he was no doubt conscious of this. If you look at **2 Kings 14: 25**, you will see that he is mentioned there. It seems that he lived in the times of Jeroboam II, a wicked, yet very successful king of Israel. Now compare this with **Amos 1: 1**, and you will see that Jonah probably lived at the time when Amos was prophesying to the northern Kingdom of Israel. These were wicked days as we have already seen, and with the Assyrians growing more powerful, the existence of many smaller states was becoming perilously threatened. Remember that it was the Assyrians who later carried away the Israelites into captivity in about 722 B.C.

Jonah was a man who was given a MISSION and a MESSAGE. His was not a task which related to his own nation. **Jonah 1: 2** gives the CALL - "**Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness is come up before Me.**" This tells us that God not only knew the evils of His own people, but He also knew the sin of all the Gentile nations around them. NINEVEH, the great Assyrian capital, was no exception and God had something to say to it.

We will look at the life of Jonah in four ways, but especially remembering that God is patient and long-suffering.

1. His DIRECTION. God told the prophet to go to Nineveh and preach. Jonah promptly took a ship to Tarshish. So very soon he was going in the wrong DIRECTION. Notice **Jonah 1: 3**, where Jonah's object was to go "**from the presence of the Lord**". We notice that this was the beginning of the prophet's troubles. He went 'down' to Joppa, 'down' into the ship - 'down' into the lowest part of the ship, (**verse 5**) and finally into the fish. The Lord sent a storm at sea and soon the safety of crew and passengers was threatened. How surprising that Jonah could sleep through it all! The episode ends with him being cast into the sea, where he is swallowed by a great fish. We can learn two lessons right away. First of all, the PERIL of disobeying God. If God commands us to do something for Him, then we must do it. To refuse could bring sorrow and disaster. But the second lesson we learn is that God is PATIENT, even with a disobedient servant. Remember that God wanted to reach a wicked Gentile city with a message of warning. This proved His kindness - He was unwilling to destroy Nineveh. Jonah was the mouthpiece that God wished to use. But he failed! How sad to reflect that Nineveh might never have heard God's warning if Jonah had had his way.

2. His DELIVERANCE. Maybe you have considered it to be highly unlikely for a man to pray from the inside of a fish, yet this is what Jonah did. (**see Jonah 2: 1**). This chapter gives us a song from the stomach of a fish. In this song and prayer, the prophet called to mind all that he knew of God's power to save.

Jonah had come to an end of himself and his rebellion against God's will. He could sink no lower and his very distance from God made him want to return to Him. Again God's patience is greater than the prophet's sin. The fish threw him back onto dry land again.

Someone has said that the fish held on to Jonah until he cried, "**Salvation is of the Lord**". (**Jonah 2: 9**) Then it could stand him no longer, so it vomited him out! Whatever the cause, God was in control and Jonah was delivered.

3. His DECISION. God gave Jonah another opportunity to preach to Nineveh. Again God's patience shines through. **Jonah 3: 3** tells us that he went according to the word of the Lord. The deliverance of the city hung on Jonah's willingness to go. The city repented, and for a while was spared God's judgment. Here in the Old Testament we have a wonderful picture of the grace of God. He does not wish the death of any, but He longs to save and bless all men, **1 Timothy 2: 3 & 4**. Remember that God desires us to tell others who are not Christians of His willingness to save those who will repent of their sin. It is our responsibility, just as it was Jonah's, to warn others of God's judgment, and seek to lead them to the Saviour. Of course, we shall often find that God is more willing to forgive men, than they are to repent. Yet if we witness faithfully to our friends and neighbours, it is possible that they will repent, as the people of Nineveh did, and turn to the Lord Jesus. We have to DECIDE to witness for the Lord.

4. His DEPRESSION. The book of Jonah ends in rather a strange way. We find a prophet who sulked because God was kind. **Chapter 4: 1** tells us that the messenger of the Lord who saw such dramatic results for his preaching, was displeased and angry. The chapter makes strange reading, as God reasons with His difficult servant. Yet again we see God's great patience in His dealings with Jonah. He simply pleads with Jonah and reasons that His mercy towards the wicked city of Nineveh was more important than Jonah's self-centred concerns. Read this prophecy carefully. God needs messengers today to tell men and women of His love and willingness to save.

Study 3

Haggai - God needs Workers

Read

Haggai chapters 1 & 2

The prophet Haggai lived in a different time altogether to that of Hosea, Jeremiah, and the others we have considered. He is one of the post-exilic prophets, that is, those who did their work AFTER God's people returned from the Captivity of Babylon. How they returned is quite a fascinating story to follow through. Jeremiah had foretold that they would be taken into exile for 70 years, **Jeremiah 29: 10**. When the time had expired, God had His man ready to allow the Israelites to return. The Kingdom of Babylon had been overthrown by the Medes and Persians, and Cyrus the Persian gave decree that such a return should take place. Notice that Isaiah prophesied that this would take place, and Cyrus is described as God's servant in **Isaiah 44: 28 - 45: 5**.

Look now at **Ezra chapter 1**. In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord stirred him up to let captives return to Jerusalem to rebuild His house. God does not always work through His own people. In fact, He works through

any means He chooses. In an ordered and effective way, Joshua and Zerubbabel, with the people, worked and laid the foundation of the house of the Lord. **Ezra 3** describes the rejoicing at the laying of the foundation. Unfortunately, enemies came in and **Ezra 4: 24** describes how the work came to an end. All the prospects of restoration seemed to have come to nothing.

This is where the prophecy of Haggai fits into the story. If you compare **Ezra 5: 1** with **Haggai 1: 1** you will see that it was the job of Haggai and also his younger partner Zechariah to stir up the people into renewed action to build God's house. God needed willing workers. This is the message that Haggai was called to give. We do not know much about him, where he came from, or even what his position was among the people. Yet he fulfilled an essential task. He was marked by enterprise, enthusiasm and dynamic energy - three qualities which every worker for God needs when engaging in His work.

Notice the PROBLEMS Haggai faced.

There were reasons for the failure of the work of God. He challenges the people with a direct question, **"Is it time for you, yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses and this Temple to lie in ruins?" (Haggai 1: 4)** It was true that in the first place their enemies had discouraged them and eventually caused the work to cease. It is also true that it is easier to stop working than it is to pick up the threads and begin again. But discouragement had also brought departure from the Lord. All their time and money was being spent on building their own houses and looking after their own interests. Evidently this brought them very little satisfaction. God had sent drought and destruction to open their eyes to their erroneous path. **"Consider your ways"** was a repeated challenge from the Lord. **(Haggai 1: 5 and 7)**

Another problem that was evident among the people was a comparison of the chaos of the present situation with the glory of the past. **(Haggai 2: 3)** 'It can never be the same again!', is the cry that we can almost hear being said by those who were guilty of such a comparison. God had to deal with this attitude, and the message of Haggai offered cheer and encouragement.

There was a third problem which was very serious. **Haggai 2: 13 & 14** tell us that the priests, who should have been clean and holy, were defiled and sinful. No real progress could be made until such evil was put away. God's workers must be pure if the work is to prosper. This is a message for us today.

Now we look at God's PLAN revealed in the message of Haggai.

It is declared very simply in **Haggai 1: 8**. **"Go up to the mountains, and bring wood, and build the Temple; that I may take pleasure in it, and be glorified, says the Lord."** GO - BRING - BUILD! Do you get the message? Against this background Haggai inspired the people to obey the word of the Lord, and in **Haggai 1: 12-15** we read of the ready response to the challenge of God, **"they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God."**

We notice also in Haggai's message, God's wonderful PROMISE.

Look carefully through the prophecy and notice the way in which the Lord made every effort to inspire the people in their work. The very best promise that could be given is found in **chapter 1: 13** **"I am with you, says the Lord."**

No better assurance could be received than this. When you seek to serve the Lord Jesus it is essential that you should have His presence with you. He said to His disciples, **"Without me you can do nothing". (John 15: 5)** There are two other great promises worth noting. First of all, God said to the people through Haggai that He would **"fill this Temple with glory". (2: 7)** Then He told them that the glory of the house they were building would be greater than the glory of the former one. This was the PROSPECT that God set before His people. How wonderful these promises were. Haggai played a vital part in stimulating interest in the Lord's work through the message that He gave.

God still needs such workers today. Particularly young workers, who in the early days of their Christian lives, learn the secret of putting their whole heart into serving Christ. Nevertheless we ALL have a vital part to play in God's service. There will be PROBLEMS! But God has a PLAN, and it is for us - for YOU - to discover what His particular plan is for YOUR life. He will inspire and enable you, if you really lay hold of His PROMISES of power. And He will always show you the PROSPECT of blessing.

Study 4

Malachi - God must be First

Read Malachi chapters 1 - 4

We now come to the last study in the messages of the Old Testament prophets. Possibly when you began you were wondering whatever you could find in these books which were written so long ago. I hope you have found something to challenge and help you in your studies. Always remember that they are a vital part of God's inspired Word. We come now to the prophet Malachi and the latest, in time scale, of all the messages which came from the prophets. The period is later than that of Haggai and Zechariah. The Old Testament canon, as we know it, came to a close with Malachi, and between it and the Gospels, there is a gap of about four hundred years.

The conditions which faced Malachi as he proclaimed his message were sad indeed and all that he says contains a deeply serious note. He speaks to a people who had lost those standards which God required. His message is a cry from the heart to give God His proper place. It seems as if the attitude of the nation at that time was 'anything will do for God.' Instead of giving Him the first place, He was a long way down their list of priorities. Their tithes and offerings should have been their very best produce, but instead they were bringing very inferior goods to God. Everything pertaining to the service of God seemed dull and dreary and completely lacking in drive or enthusiasm.

Malachi exposes without any hesitation the evils of the people. You will notice that these evils concerned the spiritual life of the nation. Bear in mind too, that these conditions developed AFTER the return from Captivity, and following the spiritual recovery of Israel during Haggai's time. It does remind us that people are slow to learn the lessons of history. Captivity did not teach them that without God and His blessing they were bound to fail. Four points of failure are brought out and the answers are given in the message.

1. RELATIONSHIP. Through Malachi God states at once His relationship with the nation. **"I have LOVED YOU." (Malachi 1: 2)**

Questions

How wonderful! Yes, however much the people had turned away from Him during their history - HE REMAINED THE SAME. **“Yet you say, in what way have You loved us?”** Malachi challenged the people with their callous indifference to the unchanging love of their God. Perhaps we can understand why so many evils could be found in the nation, when we realise that they had lost their love for God. Anything became possible when this relationship was broken. There is a parallel for us here. It was when we had no love for the Lord Jesus that He showed His love for us by dying for us. **“We love Him because He first loved us.” (1 John 4: 19)** Each time we stray away from the Lord and do things that displease Him, we betray this relationship, just as Israel did. How terrible to get SO far away that even the fact of God’s love is questioned.

2. REVERENCE. The second complaint that Malachi had was that the people had lost their respect for God. **“A son honours his father and a servant his master. .. where is my honour?” (Chapter 1: 6)** They despised God’s name, yet again they came back with the question, **“In what way have we despised Your name?”** The proof of their lack of reverence was seen in that they brought to God that which was second best. He was not FIRST or the BEST with them. The sacrifices they offered were inferior - blind, lame and sick animals. The ceremonial law of Israel demanded that which had NO BLEMISH. Only perfect animals were good enough for God because they were a picture of the **“Lamb of God”** who was to come.

We can learn this lesson here, that if we truly love God, He will have FIRST place and we will reverence His name. We shall never dishonour the name of the Lord Jesus if to us He is the dearest and best.

3. RESPONSE. Look at the question in **chapter 3: 8**, **“Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed me.”** Not only were they bringing to God that which dishonoured Him, but they were NOT bringing all that they should. The tithes - the tenth part of their possessions which was God’s due - and their offerings were missing. Instead of God’s house being full, it was empty. Yet again the question is asked, **“In what way have we robbed You?”** How blind their sin had made them! So the great promise of God comes to encourage and inspire them to alter their ways. **“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse... prove me now... If I will not open for you the windows of Heaven and pour out for you such blessing”.** (Malachi 3: 10) The lesson here is that God will give us more blessings than we can contain if we surrender to Him. (Ephesians 3: 17-21) But the message is ‘God must be first.’ We must realise that we are not our own - we have been bought by the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, to be for God alone, see **1 Corinthians 6: 19 & 20 and 1 Corinthians 7: 22 & 23.**

4. RESPONSIBILITY. We close this lesson, and our series, with one more thought on Israel’s failure. In **chapter 2** God speaks to the priests - those who represented the people before God, and whose duty it was to teach them God’s Word. Read this chapter carefully. There was a total lack of a sense of responsibility towards God and His people. In their blindness they ask again, **“For what reason?” (2: 14)** God was weary with their words (2: 17), for they were words without deeds. Remember, if you lose your love for the Lord and your reverence for His name, it will become easy for you to shrug off responsibility in the Lord’s work. Only those who LOVE are willing to WORK! On this challenging note we can conclude!

Study 1 JEREMIAH - GOD IS TRUE

1. What name is sometimes given to Jeremiah, and why?
2. a) Who was on the throne of Judah when Jeremiah began his ministry?
b) What sad event took place at the end of it?
3. What two evils did God accuse the nation of committing?
4. What was the most important fact about the call of Jeremiah?
5. a) Say in your own words what was the secret of Jeremiah’s constancy.
b) How can we follow his example?

Study 2 JONAH - GOD IS PATIENT

1. In what way did Jonah’s mission differ from prophets like Jeremiah and Amos?
2. Compare **Psalm 139** with **Jonah 1: 3** and say why Jonah’s escape plan was sure to fail.
3. What have you learnt about the character of God from this lesson?
4. In what way is Jonah a picture of the Lord Jesus? See **Matthew 12: 39-41.**
5. What is our responsibility as God’s messengers today, and what is God’s message?

Study 3 HAGGAI - GOD NEEDS WORKERS

1. What was the essential difference between the time in which Haggai prophesied and that of Jeremiah?
2. In what way was King Cyrus the servant of God?
3. What effect did discouragement have upon the people of Israel in Haggai’s time?
4. What was the ‘core’ of God’s message through Haggai?
5. a) What was the great promise that God gave the people of Israel at this time?
b) In what way can we claim this promise today?

Study 4 MALACHI - GOD MUST BE FIRST

1. What had the people of Malachi’s time lost?
2. Malachi rebuked certain evils - with what were these concerned?
3. What was the main difference between God’s love for His people and their love for Him?
4. In what way had the nation of Israel robbed God and shown their lack of respect for Him?
5. What has God done for us to make us wholly His, and how should we respond to this?