

Destruction and Despair

Jeremiah 19-20

Jeremiah 19 - *“Thus says the Lord: “Go and get a potter’s earthen flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests. ² And go out to the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, which is by the entry of the Potsherd Gate; and proclaim there the words that I will tell you. ³ Say, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem.*

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: “Behold, I will bring such a catastrophe on this place, that whoever hears of it, his ears will tingle, ⁴ because they have forsaken Me and made this an alien place, because they have burned incense in it to other gods whom neither they, their fathers, nor the kings of Judah have known, and have filled this place with the blood of the innocents. ⁵ They have also built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind.

⁶ Therefore behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “that this place shall no more be called Tophet or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. ⁷ And I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hands of those who seek their lives. Their corpses I will give as meat for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. ⁸ I will make this city desolate and a hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its plagues. ⁹ And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters. Everyone shall eat the flesh of his friend in the siege, in the desperation with which their enemies and those who seek their lives shall drive them to despair.”

¹⁰ “Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, ¹¹ and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: “Even so I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, which cannot be made whole again; and they shall bury them in Tophet till there is no place to bury. ¹² Thus I will do to this place,” says the Lord, “and to its inhabitants, and make this city like Tophet. ¹³ And the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah shall be defiled like the place of Tophet, because of all the houses on whose roofs they have burned incense to all the host of heaven, and poured out drink offerings to other gods.””

¹⁴ Then Jeremiah came from Tophet, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy; and he stood in the court of the Lord’s house and said to all the people, ¹⁵ “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Behold, I will bring on this city and on all her towns all the doom that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks that that they might not hear My words.”

Background Notes

In Jeremiah 18 we discussed the object lesson of the potter and the clay vessel. The object lesson of the broken clay vessel was recorded in chapter 19. The meaning of the potter and his clay vessel was the sovereignty of God over all

Israel and over all nations. The meaning of the broken clay vessel was that Jerusalem would be totally destroyed by the invasion of the Babylonian armies. The invasion would be coming in the near future.

The relationship between these two object lessons is obvious. In chapter 18, the clay was still soft, and the message was that God would withhold His judgment if the nation would change her ways. But in chapter 19, the clay vessel that Jeremiah was to buy was already hardened, and no longer soft and moldable. It would break when dropped, just as sinful and hardened Israel would be broken.

God told Jeremiah to give the lesson of the broken clay jar and his message of judgment outside the Potsherd Gate. This may have been another name for the Dung Gate, in the southern end of the city, where broken pottery and refuse was thrown into the Hinnom Valley. Heathen worship took place in the Hinnom Valley, including child sacrifice. Human sacrifice was totally foreign to God's commandments (v5).

Doctrinal Points

1. The message of the prophet includes good news and bad news.

A prophet is one who speaks forth the Word of God - not just one who predicts future events. As a prophet, Jeremiah spoke forth both God's good news - and the bad news as well. The good news, of course, was that there would be a return from the Babylonian captivity, and there would be a great future for restored Israel under the New Covenant.

Although this good news was predicted and pronounced by Jeremiah, there was bad news as well. Immediate judgment was facing Judah because of the people's sins. The Valley of Hinnom would be called the Valley of Slaughter because so many would be killed in the Babylonian bloodbath (v6-7).

During the siege of Jerusalem (which lasted for over a year), conditions would become so bad that some of the people would actually practice cannibalism (v9). These dreadful conditions literally took place. Jeremiah gave this message to the leaders at the Hinnom Valley, by the Potsherd Gate, as he broke the earthenware jar. Then Jeremiah returned to the court of the Temple and gave the same bad news to the people.

We too are called by God to give the good news and the bad news of God's revealed Word to the people we contact. In that sense, all of us are prophets. We are responsible to speak forth the Word of God, including God's judgment that rests upon those who will not believe (John 3:36). The message of the prophet includes both good and bad news.

2. The life of the prophet includes up times and down times.

Jeremiah 20:1-6 - *"Now Pashhur the son of Immer, the priest who was also chief governor in the house of the Lord, heard that Jeremiah prophesied these things. ² Then Pashhur struck Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks*

that were in the high gate of Benjamin, which was by the house of the Lord. ³ And it happened on the next day that Pashhur brought Jeremiah out of the stocks.

Then Jeremiah said to him, "The Lord has not called your name Pashhur, but Magor-Missabib. ⁴ For thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; and they shall fall by the sword of their enemies, and your eyes shall see it. I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive to Babylon and slay them with the sword.' ⁵ Moreover I will deliver all the wealth of this city, all its produce, and all its precious things; all the treasures of the kings of Judah I will give into the hand of their enemies, who will plunder them, seize them, and carry them to Babylon. ⁶ And you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. You shall go to Babylon, and there you shall die, and be buried there, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied lies.'"

Chapter 20 was one of the most difficult and "down" times in Jeremiah's life. Pashhur was a priest who was in charge of the Temple area. He didn't like Jeremiah's object lesson and its associated message of judgment, so he had Jeremiah beaten and put in stocks on public display. Not a pleasant experience! When Jeremiah was released he said that God had given Pashhur a different name: Magor-Missabib, meaning "terror on every side." Verses 4-6 indicated that "terror on every side" would be Pashhur's personal experience, as Babylon conquered Judah and Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 20:7-18 – "O Lord, You induced me, and I was persuaded. You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me, ⁸ for when I spoke, I cried out. I shouted, "Violence and plunder!" because the word of the Lord was made to me a reproach and a derision daily.

⁹ Then I said, "I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name." But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I was weary of holding it back, and I could not.

¹⁰ For I heard many mocking: "Fear on every side!" "Report," they say, "and we will report it!" All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, "Perhaps he can be induced [deceived]. Then we will prevail against him, and we will take our revenge on him." ¹¹ But the Lord is with me as a mighty, awesome One. Therefore, my persecutors will stumble, and will not prevail. They will be greatly ashamed, for they will not prosper. Their everlasting confusion will never be forgotten. ¹² But, O Lord of hosts, You who test the righteous, and see the mind and heart, let me see Your vengeance on them, for I have pleaded my cause before You. ¹³ Sing to the Lord! Praise the Lord, for He has delivered the life of the poor from the hand of evildoers!

¹⁴ Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me! ¹⁵ Let the man be cursed who brought news to my father, saying, "A male child has been born to you!" - making him very glad.

¹⁶ And let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew, and did not relent. Let him hear the cry in the morning and the shouting at noon, ¹⁷ because he did not kill me from the womb, that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb always enlarged with me.

¹⁸ Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?

Jeremiah's prayer is recorded from verse 7 to the end of the chapter. This prayer contained both confession and complaint, and it showed how discouraged Jeremiah was at this point in his life and ministry as a prophet.

Jeremiah thought that God had deceived him, because people were mocking him rather than responding to his teaching (v7-8). Everyone was talking behind Jeremiah's back (v10). Even his friends had turned against him. The Bible doesn't condone Jeremiah's discouraged statements here, but many people who are involved in ministry can relate to his discouragement.

We can relate to Jeremiah in verse 9 as well - the Word of God is like fire in our bones! Let's not keep it shut up inside - let's share it with others! But Jeremiah was confident that the Lord was his strong bodyguard, and that He would take care of any vengeance that was required, so Jeremiah was able to come up from the valley of despair and sing the Lord's praises (v11-13).

In verses 14-18, Jeremiah went down into the valley of despair once again - and actually wished he had never been born. Normally fathers celebrate the news that a son has been born (v15), but Jeremiah said that it would have been better if that messenger had been killed in a catastrophe and never brought such news (v16). In fact, he actually said that it would have been better if he had been a miscarriage, or stillborn (v17-18).

As a messenger of God's Word, have you ever felt this low? Have you ever been mocked and despised for being a Christian, and for trying to share God's Word with your neighbors and colleagues at work? The life of a prophet includes up and down times.

Practical Application

Stay moldable!

Let's go back to the earthenware jar that Jeremiah broke as an object lesson in chapter 19. That jar broke because it was no longer soft clay, like the potter's clay in chapter 18. In chapter 18, the potter was able to re-use the soft clay of the flawed vessel and mold it into a new vessel. But in chapter 19, the vessel's clay was hardened and no longer moldable. In the same way, the people of Israel were hardened – they were set in their sinful ways. They were no longer moldable, and had to be broken.

How about us? Are we set in our own selfish ways? Are we hardened to the molding work of God in our lives? Proverbs 29:1 says, *"He who is often rebuked and hardens his neck will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."*

A word to the wise is sufficient.

Stay moldable!