

The Gloomy Patriot

By David Feddes

He was the man people loved to hate. It seemed he was always saying something nasty. He compared his country to a donkey in heat (2:24). He said the people were a bunch of shameless prostitutes (3:1-3). He said there wasn't a decent person to be found anywhere, and he compared his countrymen to overfed, oversexed stallions neighing for somebody else's wife (5:1-8). He said the religious leaders were nothing but liars and thieves and charlatans (6:13-14). He said government leaders were crooks who just wanted to get rich, no matter who they hurt in the process (22:1-17). He warned that disaster was coming. He said his nation would be conquered and ruined by invaders. Jeremiah had something bad to say about just about everybody, and just about everybody had something bad to say about him. Jeremiah was as popular as an alligator at a pool party!

When people heard Jeremiah, they heard gloom and doom. Why couldn't he say something positive? When people heard Jeremiah say the nation would fall, they heard a man who hated his country. Didn't this traitor know the meaning of patriotism? When they saw Jeremiah, they saw a man with a heart of brass; he tore into them without any concern for their feelings. They saw a man with the hide of a rhinoceros, with skin so thick that no amount of criticism could bother him or make him back off.

But this man who seemed so tough was actually very shy and sensitive. This man who seemed to enjoy criticizing people and making them miserable was really heartbroken about what was going to happen to them. This man who seemed like a traitor was the greatest of patriots. And ultimately, the message of this man, which sounded so full of gloom and doom, turned out to be the thing that kept people's hope alive in their darkest hour.

You see, Jeremiah was a prophet of God. He didn't speak of judgment because he liked to, but because he had to. When God first told Jeremiah that he was appointed to be a prophet, Jeremiah said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." But God told him not to think of himself as just a shy kid. "You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you" (1:4-8).

So despite his youth, despite his shy and sensitive nature, Jeremiah spoke a word from God that had a power all its own. It hurt Jeremiah terribly when people hated him, but he couldn't shut up, even if he tried. At one point, when people's opposition was really getting to him, Jeremiah wrote,

I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot (20:7-9).

The prophet simply had to speak the word of God burning in his heart, or he would explode.

Jeremiah didn't enjoy telling the people of the coming judgment. He didn't like telling his fellow citizens in Judah that God was sending a vicious army from Babylon to punish them. In fact, Jeremiah was so heartbroken that he is sometimes called "the weeping prophet." He wrote: "Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror

grips me" (8:21). "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (9:1).

Nobody loved his people or his nation more than Jeremiah. He wept just thinking about the coming judgment, and he prayed fervently on their behalf (14:7-9,19-22). He was no traitor. Jeremiah was a patriot who told the nation the truth about itself, even when nobody wanted to listen.

Eventually the Babylonians stormed into Jerusalem, killing men, raping women, enslaving children, burning houses, destroying their splendid temple. Did Jeremiah gloat and say, "I told you so"? No, he felt his people's pain, and he composed the heartrending poem included in the Bible as the book of Lamentations. The great prophet gave his people the words to express their horror and grief, and at the same time he showed them that, no matter how grim their situation, they still had reason to hope. Jeremiah cried with them and at the same time helped them to see light through their tears. He wrote,

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:21-23).

Dirt Drinkers

Jeremiah spoke of God's great faithfulness even in the midst of judgment. This prophet of God, this courageous reformer with an unpopular message, is someone we desperately need to hear today. Let's take a closer look at his message.

Early in the book of Jeremiah, God states the basic problem this way: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (2:13). That was a problem back then, and it's a problem now. We forsake the one who gives eternal life as a free gift, and we sweat away digging holes in the ground that offer nothing to drink but dirt. We dirt drinkers prefer man-made religion to God-given salvation.

Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38). By trusting Christ, we can drink cool, fresh water from the bubbling spring of his Spirit, but for some reason, we'd rather dig our own dry hole in the ground and try to live on dirt.

Trendy or True?

Why is that? Well, according to Jeremiah, we prefer trendiness to truth. We're in love with "progress." Jeremiah was addressing people who enjoyed listening to up-to-date preachers, men who knew how to preach the kind of stuff people liked to hear. As God described it, "They treat the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (6:14).

This kind of preaching is part of consumer religion. When a church needs a new pastor, the people often look for a talented professional who will "fit in" with them. Once they find someone who seems to meet their expectations, they try to meet his expectations as well, offering salary, benefits, and housing to lure him to their church.

It's a simple transaction. The people get what they want. The preacher gets what he wants.

In consumer religion, the customer is king. People pay the preacher to perform baptisms, weddings, and funerals, so he'd better not refuse any request to perform these rituals, even if the people are far from God. People pay the preacher to uplift them, so he'd better not upset them.

In consumer religion, we get what we pay for, but we also pay for what we get. We pay for it with churches that have plenty of business savvy but little of God's Spirit. We pay for it by becoming allergic to divine truth (6:10). We pay for it with a dead conscience (6:15). In the end, if nothing changes, we pay for it with our life (6:19).

In Jeremiah's time, the new trends in preaching helped people feel good about themselves. They never gave a second thought to their sins. "Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?" asks God. "No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush." Of course not! Why should they blush? Sure, they weren't living according to God's Word, but that didn't mean they were wrong. Scripture was wrong. The books of Moses and David and other Scriptures were out of date. Ancient history! So the religious experts worked hard to reform the old-fashioned teachings and bring them up to date.

But God's revelation through Jeremiah was different. "This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, "We will not walk in it" (6:16).

We're so in love with progress, so eager to keep up with the times, so determined not to be left behind, that we fall for every fad. We need to stop chasing what is new, and hold fast to what is true. "Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it." Trendiness is no substitute for truth. Jeremiah made that very clear.

Institution Or Integrity?

Jeremiah also made it clear that an institution is no substitute for integrity. He was speaking to people who were very proud of their splendid temple. When Jeremiah spoke of God's judgment, they didn't believe him. They had God's temple! That was their good luck charm. God wouldn't let anything happen to his temple, would he? Jeremiah stood at the gate of the temple and said,

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers forever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord. (7:3-11)

When you turn a house of prayer into Robber's Roost, you can't expect God to keep you safe. The Lord destroyed that magnificent temple, just as Jeremiah said he would. So do you really think God will spare a denominational headquarters or a congregation that no longer follows his Word?

You can't have a church saying that all religions lead to God—that any old idol is as good as Christ—and then think God will bless you. You can't have a denomination that approves shedding the blood of helpless unborn children, and claim to have God's favor. You can't have a congregation full of people who hate other races and trample the poor, and think that God has some special preference for your group. You can't appoint study committees that make excuses for every sexual perversion under the sun, and say that you speak for God. You can't play games with every Bible passage that doesn't seem to fit with the modern world, and then label this the new-and-improved church that God has no choice but to bless. No institution is exempt from God's judgment. An institution is no substitute for integrity.

When someone stands up to challenge a church's evils, it's easy to label that person a troublemaker who wants to destroy the church. But remember Jeremiah. He didn't hate the temple; he loved it. He didn't look down on the priesthood; he was a priest himself. He didn't despise religious institutions as such; he wanted to reform them. He couldn't just let them be corrupted.

So don't say, "My church, right or wrong" or "My country, right or wrong." Only God deserves unconditional loyalty. The legitimacy of everything else depends on faithfulness to the Lord and to his Word. If you really love your church or your country, like Jeremiah did, you won't ignore its failings. You'll repent of sin, and you'll call others to repent.

Reforming or Deforming?

There's nothing more foolish than rejecting God's Word and his Way. According to Jeremiah, if you called such people birdbrains, you'd be insulting the birds. Jeremiah says, "Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration. But my people do not know the requirements of the Lord" (8:7). The birds have the sense to follow the instincts God gave them, but these people don't seem to have a clue what God wants.

Sometimes when we want to follow a new trend, we take comfort in the fact that it has the approval of experts in biblical studies. As long as the experts say it's okay, we can stray from the historic faith. But as Jeremiah asked,

How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have? (8:8-9)

When special committees of experts study the Bible and then suggest brand new ideas that contradict the ideas and practices of the prophets and Jesus and the apostles and the church throughout the centuries, we've got a problem. Scholars who revere God's Word and respect the church's historic understanding of his truth can help strengthen our faith, but when the scribes treat the Bible as just another document, instead of God's inspired Word, they are handling it falsely. These scribes and experts often talk

about reforming our understanding of Scripture, but what they're really doing is *deforming* it.

In the Christian faith, reform doesn't mean evolving and progressing beyond God's revelation in Christ and in Scripture. Reform means to keep going back again and again to the historic faith. It means returning again and again to the unchanging God, and to Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. This doesn't mean we're locked in the past. We need to apply the old truth to new situations. But we can't invent new truth to improve on what God has already revealed. When scholars start doing that, they become scribes who handle God's Word falsely. At that point we need to ask with Jeremiah, "Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have?"

Attacking the Messenger

These are the kinds of criticisms that made everyone so angry at Jeremiah. His fellow priests had him beaten and locked up with his arms and legs fastened in stocks (20:2). Another time they dumped him down the shaft of an empty cistern. They were tired of hearing that their religion was like an empty hole, so they dumped Jeremiah down a hole. They would have let him die there if a brave slave hadn't intervened (38:1-13). The rescuer, an African, stepped forward and got Jeremiah out of that awful hole.

People could hate Jeremiah and do cruel things to him, but one thing they couldn't do: they couldn't change the truth. The corrupt king had just built a fabulous new palace using money that he should have used to help the poor people of his kingdom. He was like some rulers still today, who spend lavishly on their own luxuries, instead of helping the needy. Jeremiah preached that this corrupt, selfish ruler would have the burial of a donkey. The king didn't like that. So when someone gave him a scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies, the king decided to destroy it. Sitting by the fire in his palace, he would read one part of the scroll, cut it off, and toss it in the fire. He kept doing this until the entire scroll had been cut into pieces and burned. But truth doesn't burn as easily as paper burns. Jeremiah produced another scroll containing everything that had been on the first one. "And many similar words were added to them" (36:20-32). Sure enough, that king died before reaching old age and did not receive an honorable burial.

Trusting a Realist

Ultimately, God's judgment came on all of Jerusalem and Judah. When the judgment struck, nobody got any comfort from the preachers of platitudes. They needed someone who could speak honestly of their guilt and wickedness, who could share their grief and despair in defeat and exile, who could face the situation in all its horror and blackness, and yet declare hope. The man who had made them so angry, who seemed far too gloomy, was now the one they looked to for their only ray of hope.

A pastor friend of mine told me how a man and woman asked him to perform their marriage ceremony. The pastor knew that the couple didn't share a commitment to Christ, so they really had no business seeking a church wedding. On top of that, the pastor knew that the relationship had serious problems, so serious that he didn't think the marriage would last. The honest pastor urged them to put their wedding on hold, and he refused to lead the ceremony unless they worked through these issues first. The couple stormed out of his office in a rage. They found another minister to marry them.

Several months later, the pastor's doorbell rang. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see the newly married couple who had been so furious with him. "We're having problems, and we're wondering if you would help us." The pastor said, "Why come to me? Why not go to the minister who did your wedding? He married you. Why not ask him to counsel you?" The couple said, "Oh, we can't trust him! He just did what we asked. You're honest. You told us the truth. You're realistic about our problems. You cared about us enough to challenge us and say no. That's the kind of person we need." So the pastor sat down with them. His tough love had infuriated them, but when things fell apart, the only person they trusted was the one who had seen how serious their problems were and had loved them enough to say so.

Something similar happened with Jeremiah. He had been considered public enemy number one, but when disaster struck, during the worst time of Judah's history, Jeremiah's message kept their hope alive. Platitudes wouldn't cut it any more. The people needed a word from God. Jeremiah brought them a message that took account of their true condition in all its bleakness, and yet offered a future. God's Word through Jeremiah crushed any reason they might have for hoping in themselves, but in doing so, it taught them to put their hope in God.

Hope and a Future

Through Jeremiah God showed them that he is in control. He is like a potter with clay. If the lump he's working on doesn't turn out, God can crush it back into a lump. But God can also take that crushed lump and start afresh and form something new from it (18:1-10). God could reduce them to nothing, but he could also make something of them again. Even in the time of judgment, they were in the hands of a sovereign God. That was their only hope, but it was enough. Through Jeremiah God said:

"I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. 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. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (29:10-13).

In their despair, many of these broken people remembered Jeremiah's words, and they learned to trust in God alone. They knew that the threats of judgment hadn't been a bluff, so they also knew that the promises of joy wouldn't be empty, either. They knew they could believe God when he said, "I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow" (31:13).

When the prophet of gloom spoke about joy, they had to listen. Earlier Jeremiah told them, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it" (17:9). Jeremiah's diagnosis of their condition couldn't have been grimmer, and his predictions of the nation's destruction couldn't have been more frightening. But that made him all the more believable when he spoke of God's grace. He knew exactly who they were and how bad they had been, he knew how awful their troubles were, and he *still* declared a message of hope.

Beyond all human hope, Jeremiah taught the people to hope in God. He was pessimistic about human potential, but he had an unwavering faith in divine power. He taught them to give up on their own righteousness and to trust in a leader yet to come, whose title would be "the Lord our Righteousness" (23:1-8). The person who fulfills that

prophecy is Jesus, who makes people right with God. Jeremiah taught that despite evil hearts, people could be saved because the Lord would give them new hearts.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (31:33-34)

This is the only message that brings realistic hope and salvation to sinful people like you and me. Not the latest trend, but the Word of God. Not our own efforts, not our own potential, not our own righteousness, but someone whose title is "the Lord our righteousness." According to the Bible, "this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:22). This is the historic faith of God's people. We submit to God's judgment and trust his mercy. We give up on our own cisterns, cracked and dry, and we drink from the spring of living water.

PRAYER

Father in heaven, when we listen to a great prophet like Jeremiah, we'd like to think we're like him. But so often we're just like the stubborn people who refused your Way and your Word. Help all of us, and especially those of us who are religious leaders, to recognize our spiritual poverty. Help us to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to ask for the ancient paths and walk in them, and to trust your promise of hope and a future, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.