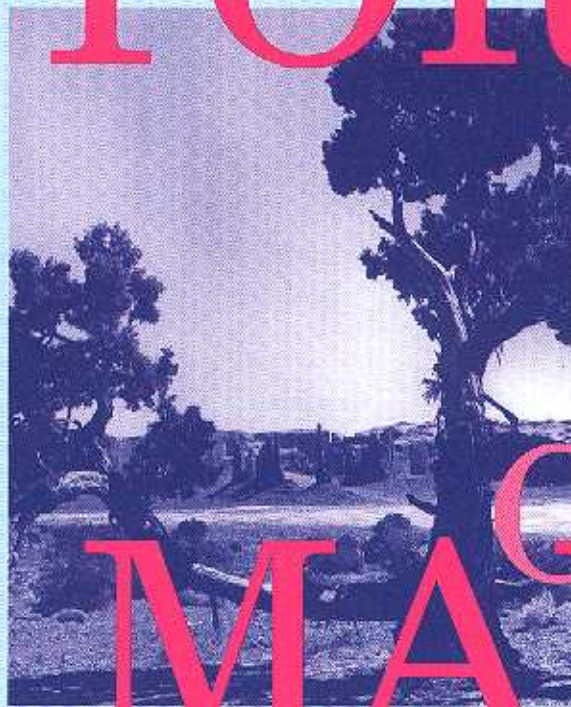


JEREMIAH

THE STORY



A MAN OF CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by William M. Ramsay

Jeremiah

The Story of a Man Caught in the Middle

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

Author

William M. Ramsay

Editor

Curtis A. Miller

Designer

Brenda L. Sullivan

Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.

Every effort has been made to trace copyrights on the materials included in this book. If any copyrighted material has nevertheless been included without permission and due acknowledgment, proper credit will be inserted in future printings after notice has been received.

© 1996 Christian Education Program Area, Congregational Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, KY. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

Printed in the United States of America.

This book is part of the Men's Bible Study series produced through the Office for Men's Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Presbyterian Publishing Corporation

100 Witherspoon Street Louisville, KY 40202-1396
1-800-227-2872

Orders: Ext. 1, Option 1
Curriculum Helpline: Ext. 3
Fax: 502-569-5113

Jeremiah

Table of CONTENTS

Introduction to the Men's Bible Study		3
Introduction to Jeremiah		5
session one	<i>A Man Called by God</i>	8
	<i>*God's Call to You</i>	
session two	<i>Challenging the State Religion</i>	12
	<i>*The Rest of the Story</i>	
session three	<i>God's People: Remolded or Shattered</i>	15
	<i>*Shattered on the City Dump</i>	
session four	<i>Hanging in There</i>	18
	<i>*Three More Examples</i>	
session five	<i>A Contrast in "Kings"</i>	21
	<i>*The Basic Problem: "We, the People"</i>	
	<i>*The Coming King</i>	
session six	<i>Building Hope in Despair</i>	25
	<i>*History's Strangest Real-Estate Deal</i>	
session seven	<i>Enduring to the Tragic End</i>	28
	<i>*The Fate of Jeremiah</i>	
	<i>*The Fate of Other Nations</i>	
the writer	<i>Biography</i>	32

Introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1) We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2) We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3) We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

4) We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5) We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6) We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7) We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing your answers with others, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leaders

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has

been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the students think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story relating to the story that has just been discussed.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leaders will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leader for the sake of time.

Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leaders also may take courage from that assurance.

Jeremiah

INTRODUCTION

To dramatize his message, Jeremiah at one time or another smashed a jug, buried his underwear, or walked around the city with an ox's yoke on his shoulders. He not only cursed his enemies, he cursed their wives and children, and he prayed to God not to pay any attention to their prayers. He also cursed his own birthday. Of the kings who reigned during his lifetime, he denounced every one but Josiah. In a time of war he openly urged people to desert to the enemy. He was regarded as a traitor, and his prophecies of doom made him so hated that even his own family and the people of his hometown plotted to assassinate him.

The Lord had called Jeremiah to proclaim God's message. Those who were angered by what he said beat him, bound him in the stocks, threw him into a dungeon, and nearly lynched him, but they could not stop him from fulfilling his calling. He took no joy in his prophecies of doom; the "weeping prophet" grieved so for his people that he once cried out that he wished that his eyes were fountains of tears. But in the end he turned down a chance for luxury in Babylon to stay with the most miserable remnant of survivors.

Fifty years later he was remembered not so much as the prophet of doom, but as the one who had also promised hope. When at last the Jewish slaves in Babylon were allowed to return, they said the very reason God had restored them was in order to fulfill the promises of "the weeping prophet." Today, every time you take communion you are reminded of one of those promises. Jeremiah had dreamed that someday God would make a "New Covenant" with the Lord's people. The night before he died, Jesus gathered his disciples around the table and announced that at last that time had come: "This is the new covenant in my blood." Jeremiah had been a forerunner of Jesus Christ.

For seven sessions we will study this remarkable prophet, his life, and his message.

The Historical Background

Behind every page of this book one can hear the march of events that were shaking the Middle East. When, in 627 B.C., Jeremiah was called, it was to be "a prophet to the nations," "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:5,10). One cannot, therefore, separate his message from the political and military events of his day. To understand Jeremiah, therefore, it helps if you know a little of the history of this chaotic time.

King Manasseh held the throne for fifty-five years by paying tribute to Assyria. A pagan, he executed his opponents and forced true worship of the Lord to become a kind of underground movement. But Manasseh's son Amon reigned only two years before he was assassinated. A period of anarchy ended with Amon's eight-year-old son Josiah on the throne. Soon the party of the prophets emerged to gain influence. The Temple was repaired and purified. The Book of Deuteronomy, or some part of it, was brought out of hiding in the Temple. In 621 B.C., Josiah undertook to make its "covenant" (a kind of contract God had made with Israel in the days of Moses) the law of the land. It was in the reign of Josiah that Jeremiah was called to his mission. He seems to have supported the king's reforms.

But it was too late. Assyria's power faded. In 609 B.C. Josiah was killed in battle with Pharaoh Neco, King of Egypt. Only three months later Egyptian forces invaded Jerusalem, and to guarantee their power over Judah they kidnapped Josiah's son, King Jehoahaz, setting his brother Jehoiakim on the throne. A survivor, he switched allegiance at the right moment to the new world power, Babylon, which was defeating Egypt, and kept his throne eleven years. His successor, Jehoiachin, however, was caught plotting a revolt against Babylon. The result was that in 597 B.C. that unfortunate monarch was carried off to Babylon, together with the people who could be most useful to the Babylonians as slaves: skilled laborers, professional people, government officials, and others. (Ezekiel and Daniel seem to have been among the early deportees.) Babylon set Zedekiah on the throne. When he too plotted a revolt, the Babylonian army invaded. For eighteen months they laid siege to Jerusalem, finally starving the city into submission. They then accomplished another mass deportation of Jews into slavery in Babylon.

One has to feel sorry for these kings, trying to protect little Judah while surrounded by giants—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. The Bible records these political events as essential background for understanding the story. But the writers' principal concern about these kings is simply this: they "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord."

Previewing Our Study of Jeremiah

Be warned, the Book of Jeremiah is confusing. It sometimes seems an almost random collection of Jeremiah's prophecies and of stories about Jeremiah. Nobody knows why they were collected in quite the order we now have them. One oracle (prophecy) will be dated in reference to one king, and a chapter or two later we read of another oracle from the time of an earlier king. The first 25 chapters are somewhat autobiographical. Then chapter 26 starts over again with an account of Jeremiah's ministry written by his secretary, Baruch. It begins with Baruch's account of events surrounding Jeremiah's Temple Sermon, of which we had already read in chapter 7. Many of the poems give no clue as to when they were spoken. (Incidentally, the inspired prophets did often speak in poetry, singing or chanting their oracles from God.) Confusing as it sometimes is, the book does give us a clear picture of the life, the message, and even the inner struggles of this man of God.

Our study, like the book itself, begins with his call, which, like Moses, Jeremiah tried unsuccessfully to reject. Chapter 11 probably comes from his earliest preaching, a plea to support the covenant of Deuteronomy, the basis of King Josiah's reforms. The first session of this study guide will focus on this concept of God's "call" to various kinds of service, a call that comes not just to prophets but to every person of faith.

Typical of Jeremiah's preaching is the Temple Sermon (7:1-15). Our second session will explore the implications for our day of Jeremiah's devastating attack on those who thought the nation's security was guaranteed by the Temple and the popular religions, but who neglected concern for the poor, for racial justice, and for the old. Chapter 26 gives Baruch's account of how Jeremiah was nearly lynched after that sermon.

Session 3 moves on to chapters 18 and 19. Here Jeremiah makes his message vivid with two uses of clay jars. The first is a lump of clay being molded by a potter. When something goes wrong the potter mashes it down and then remolds it into a beautiful vase. Perhaps, Jeremiah is saying, God will remold Judah if it will repent. But his second use of a clay vessel is in a fiery sermon of judgment; he smashes it just as, he warns, God will smash an unrepentant Judah.

Session 4 moves to chapter 20 and deals with "burnout," severe stress, so obviously characteristic of "the weeping prophet." Jeremiah does not give us a cheery six step formula for overcoming stress. He gives us an example of a man who was "caught in the middle," caught between the will of God and the will of his people. Yet, he persevered.

Session 5 looks at chapters 21—23 and the contrast between kings. There were the petty despots of Jeremiah's day, neglecting their duty to provide justice for people in need. But Jeremiah can also look down the years to the coming someday of the true Son of David, the promised Messiah. Christians see Jeremiah's hope of that king as fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Session 6 deals with an enormously important element of that hope. Early in Jeremiah's ministry, he had preached support of the Deuteronomic covenant, then being proclaimed as the law of the land by King Josiah. Now the people had broken that covenant to bits. But in chapter 31, Jeremiah, from a prison cell, sings a prose poem of hope: someday God will make a New Covenant with God's people! On the night before he died, Jesus, at the Last Supper, announced, "This is the new covenant in my blood." We are brought into that covenant anew with each communion service.

Session 7, the final session, surveys, very briefly, the last one-third of this long book, chapters 34—52. These chapters contain the sad story of the final fall of Jerusalem, and they include oracles of judgment on other nations. They give us a chance to review Jeremiah's warnings of that fall, with their implications for other nations, including our own. But there is also a brief discussion of how Jeremiah points us ahead to the New Testament and to Jesus Christ.

Vocation, burnout, judgment, injustice, government, hope in God, and the New Covenant in the true Son of David—all of these are major themes of Jeremiah. They are as important today as when "the weeping prophet" received his call in 627 B.C.

As noted above, the book is a collection of stories and sayings; it does not follow a clear outline. The outline that follows, therefore, is of limited usefulness, but it may help give you an overview.

An Outline of Jeremiah¹

“The Weeping Profit”

“Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overflow, to build and to plant” (1:9-10).

1	11	26	46	52
Jeremiah's Account of His Oracles and Experiences		Baruch's Account of the Prophet		Oracles Against the Nations
<p><i>Early Oracles, Mostly of Judgment</i></p> <p>The Prophet's Call, 1</p> <p>Israel is faithless, 2—5</p> <p>Therefore judgment is coming for the nation, 6</p> <p>The Temple Sermon pleads for repentance, 7</p> <p>But the people continue in sin, 8</p> <p>Jeremiah weeps over Jerusalem and continues to plead, 9—10</p>	<p><i>Jeremiah in Conflict and Suffering</i></p> <p>He endorses Josiah's covenant, 11</p> <p>And weeps when it is ignored, 13—15</p> <p>He continues to warn, 16—17</p> <p>Using clay to illustrate the message, 18—19</p> <p>He is arrested and tortured, 20</p> <p>Evil leaders versus the messiah, 21—23</p> <p>Now the king of Babylon is to triumph, 24—25</p>	<p>Baruch tells how, after the Temple Sermon, Jeremiah was arrested, 26</p> <p>Jeremiah wears a yoke as a warning, 27—28</p> <p>Jeremiah's "Little Book of Comfort," 30—33</p> <p>He gives his final warning, 34</p> <p>Jehoiakim is warned but cuts up the scroll, 35—36</p> <p>The fall of Jerusalem and the fate of Jeremiah, 37—45</p>		<p>Oracles against the nations:</p> <p>Egypt, 46</p> <p>Philistia, 47</p> <p>Moab, 48</p> <p>Ammon, Edom, Damascus, 49</p> <p>Babylon, 50—51</p> <p>(A historical appendix: the fall of Jerusalem), 52</p>
<p>Situation: Jeremiah prophesied from 627 to 587 B.C., in the last days of Jerusalem as it fell to Babylon.</p> <p>Message: He warned of the judgement coming, pleaded for repentance, and counseled surrender to Babylon. But when all earthly hope was lost, he promised that God would some day restore God's people.</p> <p>One Special Significance for the New Testament: This book contains the promise of "the new covenant"; Jesus is said to have inaugurated that covenant at the Last Supper (31:31—34; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25).</p>				

Some Useful Resources

Among the detailed commentaries on Jeremiah available in many libraries are these:

R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), part of the Interpretation commentary series designed for teachers and preachers.

Douglas Rawlinson Jones, *Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), a quite recent and full commentary in the New Century Bible Commentary series.

James Philip Hyatt, *Jeremiah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), in The Interpreter's Bible series. This also includes exposition by Stanley Romaine Hopper.

The author's own teacher, the late John Bright, is the author of *Jeremiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), in the Anchor Bible series.

A much briefer commentary designed to be especially useful for lay people is by Howard Tillman Kuist, *Jeremiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), in The Layman's Bible Commentary series.

Two one-volume commentaries give paragraph-by-paragraph discussion of *Jeremiah*, along with commentary on all the other books of the Bible. The most recent is Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds., *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995). Still very useful is Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971).

The author's summary of *Jeremiah* is found in *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, footnoted previously.

¹ This outline is from *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, by William M. Ramsay (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 201.

one

A Man Called **BY GOD**

Jeremiah 1

(Note: The leader may wish to review some of the information on studies on Jeremiah found in the introduction to this series.)

Introduction: Called to an Impossible Job

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

"Every Man's Life a Plan of God"—Who, me? The doctrine that I am called by God, that God has planned for me a calling, a vocation, is a startling one. It goes back in part to Jeremiah.

He was chained in the stocks, imprisoned in a cistern, nearly lynched, branded as a traitor to his country, and jailed for months. His own relatives and others from his hometown plotted to assassinate him. Like Job, he cursed the day he was born and the man who had brought to his father the news of his birth. He accused God of lying to him. But he stuck to his job; he knew he had been called to it by God.

When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet in 627 B.C., it was a time of change, political and religious. Assyria, the greatest and most cruel empire the world had ever known, was decaying. Following the death of King Manasseh, a stooge for Assyria, there had been a period of anarchy in Judah, and eight-year-old Josiah had been placed on the throne. Now there was hope for a religious revival. But the call of God we study did not come to the politicians in Jerusalem, nor the clergy in the Temple. It came to a boy—perhaps a teenager or perhaps a child—in a village in an out-of-favor family.

That supernatural call came through a pair of natural symbols. Perhaps it was as he sat in the courtyard of his village home one windy day that young Jeremiah noticed a young almond tree sprouting upward. The Hebrews loved puns, and in Hebrew the word for "almond" sounds almost the same as the word for "watch." Then he saw his mother's washing pot, boiling with the clothes, blown over by that cold wind from the north. And Jeremiah knew that God was "watching" and that God was warning of a horrible invasion from the north. God had called Jeremiah. Young Jeremiah had a quick answer; he told God, "No!"

Let us read the story together (Jer. 1:4-19).

The Leader may now read the story to the group. Or he might instead ask two men to read it, with one reading the words God spoke and the other reading Jeremiah's replies:

*God: 1:5 Jeremiah: 1:6
God: 1:7-11 a Jeremiah: 1:11b
God: 1:12-13a Jeremiah: 1:13b
God: 1:14-19*

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Here are some questions to think about. You may want to make a brief note for your answers in the space provided. Share your answers with the others in the group. (Remember, there are no "wrong" answers.)

How would you have felt if God had called you?

How valid does Jeremiah's excuse seem as he tries to refuse?

What kinds of reassurance does God give young Jeremiah?

The Scripture really does not give us any kind of direct answer to this next question, but take a guess. Everybody else in the village of Anathoth saw almond shoots and boiling pots every day.

Why do you suppose Jeremiah was the only one who heard in them the call of God?

What are the things God calls Jeremiah to do?

What sort of reception to his message is he to expect?

What will happen to Jeremiah if he doesn't stick to this frightening assignment?

God's Call to You

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

"Every Man's Life a Plan of God"—That was the title of a famous sermon preached by Horace Bushnell more than a century ago. It is still a startling idea. Preachers are "called," and so, no doubt, were the prophets of Israel. But every man? That is something else again!

In the Middle Ages, the word "vocation" or "call" got the meaning we are used to. If you had a "vocation" it meant that you were to be a priest or a monk. But the Protestant Reformation recovered the biblical idea: *all* Christians are "called." Indeed, the very word for "church" in Greek could be translated "the called." You are "called" to be a Christian, in whatever place you are and in whatever your daily work. .

Here is how Paul put it. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are *called* according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also *called*; and those whom he *called* he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:28—30, emphasis added). You are called to be a Christian. Like the disciples of old, you are called to follow Christ. The Presbyterian doctrine of the mystery of predestination has too many problems for us to explore in this session, but it does seem that Paul is saying that in some sense God has "predestined" you, has a plan for your life as a Christian. You are "called" to be part of God's plan.

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet. He was to denounce the political and religious leaders of his day and to warn of national disaster. It is not likely that God has called you to that unpleasant task. But the Bible also speaks of God having purposed and endowed some specific individuals for such diverse kinds of service as being architects, writers, judges, army officers,

musicians, governors, teachers, lawyers, government workers, farmers, and fathers. Paul could tell even slaves to do their jobs as if they were serving Christ (Eph. 6:5-8). Indeed, "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord . . ." (Col. 3:23).

A few men choose a profession while in school, prepare for it, and fulfill their ambitions in it. Most of us, however, choose only in the broadest sense, and when we are through school take whatever job comes along that pays best and seems to offer some opportunity for raises and reasonably agreeable surroundings. So what are we to make of this concept of thinking of daily work as part of one's calling by God?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What sort of work do you feel God would never call a man to do?

What differences would it make in the way a man would think about and do his job if he felt that he was "called" to it by God, that in that daily work he was serving Christ?

Jeremiah's first excuse for not doing what God called him to do was that he was too young. What excuses, if any, have you seen others use for not doing what God wanted them to do?

What excuses have you used?

"Every man's life a plan of God" In what ways, if any, can you tell the group that you have felt God's plan in your own life?

Afterword

The church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.¹

At Montreat, the great Presbyterian conference center, I had the good luck to be sitting across the table from a prominent lawyer from a southern state. He told me how, all his life, he had devoted as much time as he could to work at the church, assisting his pastor in any way he could. As he prospered he began taking one day a week away from his office, devoting it entirely to church work. Eventually he could afford to take off two days a week for that purpose. He had just accepted a position as an executive in a church governing body. Now, he reported with joy, he could devote full time to such

service. Next day I sat across from another lawyer from the same state. He spoke with full appreciation of the first man. "But," he said, "I wouldn't swap places. The other day a couple came to me saying they were celebrating their `tenth anniversary.' It was ten years since I had counseled with them, talked them into delaying the divorce they had wanted me to handle, and helped them reconcile. They wanted to thank me. And there is that poor, uneducated woman, who would never have gotten her inheritance if I hadn't gone to bat for her. I'm serving Christ in my job right where I am."

Looking Ahead

Jeremiah's most famous sermon, one that nearly got him lynched, is in Jeremiah 7:1-15. Read it, and if you have time read Baruch's account of what happened afterward, as found in Jeremiah 26:1-24.

¹ Dorothy Sayers, as quoted by Pete Hammond of *Marketplace*, in an unpublished lecture.

Challenging the STATE RELIGION Jeremiah 7:1-15; 26

Introduction: The Temple Sermon

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

"Hear the words of this covenant," young Jeremiah pleaded. It was the year 621 B.C., and, apparently, Judah's last chance.

Six years before, Jeremiah, still a boy, had heard God's call. "I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). Overwhelmed by such responsibility, he had pleaded that he was too young. But now the time had come. There was still hope; perhaps through this youthful prophet God might "build" and "plant," not "destroy." The bloody reign of semi-pagan Manasseh was over. The good King Josiah was on the throne. He had made worship of the Lord again the state religion. The Book of Deuteronomy, or some part of it, was brought out of hiding in the Temple to become a kind of covenant-constitution for the nation (2 Kings 22:1—23:30).

In the view of many commentators, Jer. 11:1–17 summarizes some of Jeremiah's first preaching. If you have studied Deuteronomy recently, you "might look at Jer. 11:1–17 and see how many of its ideas seem to reflect Deuteronomy and its newly rediscovered covenant.

(If the group has studied Deuteronomy in this series recently, the leader might pause and let the group list the ideas in this sermon that seem to reflect Deuteronomy.)

It was too late. All the curses about which Deuteronomy had warned began coming to pass. Josiah was killed in battle. His successor lasted just three months before he was deposed by Egypt. The next king, Jehoiakim, hung on for eleven years, first by paying tribute money to Egypt and then by switching allegiance to Babylon (2 Kings 23:31—24:7). And so, around the year 609 B.C., early in that treacherous sovereign's reign, Jeremiah preached what was perhaps his most famous—and for him, personally, perhaps his most disastrous—sermon.

So place yourself in this scene: Yesterday you prayed at a shrine of Baal, but today begins the Feast of Booths (Deut. 16:13–15). The state cult at the Temple is doing a booming business. Frightened by threats from Egypt and Babylon, you join a crowd of worshipers. You and

hundreds of others are climbing the steps to the great courtyard of the Temple of the Lord. The Lord has no idols, you remember, but this God does have the Temple. Did not that Temple save Jerusalem in the days of Isaiah? "Everybody" agrees that God has promised that because of its Temple, God will always deliver Zion. As you mount the great stone steps you feel a glow of security. Now with a few prayers and a sacrifice you will claim the divine insurance policy, the presence of the house of the Lord.

And suddenly a young prophet from the sticks shouts, "No!"

But read for yourself his fiery message (Jer. 7:1–15).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The Temple and the worship in it were surely good things. Why do you suppose Jeremiah attacked trust in the Temple so militantly?

"Amend your ways!" Jeremiah cried. What do you suppose he meant?

For what particular groups does Jeremiah say God demands justice?

How do you think Jeremiah's definition of true religion might compare with that of James 1:27?

Behind Jerusalem's lack of concern for those in need, however, Jeremiah saw Judah "go after other gods." Philosopher-theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as "ultimate concern." That is, whatever you put first in your life—business, family, church, health, country, or whatever—that is your god.

Given that definition of religion, what kinds of false gods would you say are most popular today?

Jeremiah described some results of such idolatry (7:8-10). Note any that seem to you characteristic of our own day.

The Bible does not tell us what happened to Shiloh, site of an ancient Israelite shrine and at one time the home of the Ark of the Covenant. Jeremiah says that the same fate will come to Jerusalem (7:12-15).

What would you guess happened to Shiloh?

How would you have reacted if you had heard Jeremiah?

The Rest of the Story

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

We know how the people who did hear Jeremiah reacted: they nearly lynched him! The first twenty-five chapters of Jeremiah are a collection of prophecies attributed to Jeremiah, including passages he wrote in the first person. But beginning with chapter 26, we have a kind of biography of the prophet written by his secretary, Baruch. (Read Jer. 26 if you have time.) Baruch tells us that after Jeremiah preached this sermon, an angry mob gathered around him, shouting, "You shall die!" (26:8). The police intervened just in time. Apparently it was with the help of a friend in a high position that he escaped this time (26:24). (He was not so fortunate later on.)

Here are some questions that may help us understand why people were so angry with Jeremiah.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Jeremiah 7:6 seems almost to say that the security of the nation does not depend on national "religion." It depends on how justly the nation treats the aliens among its people, those foreigners and people of other races whom apparently the Jewish citizens resented. It speaks also of justice toward widows and toward fatherless children. What do you suppose Jeremiah would say today about the following:

- Immigration is a serious problem in many parts of our country, draining off funds from native-born citizens and our own children. Many propose that children of illegal aliens should be excluded from school and from government medical services.

How would you guess that Jeremiah would react?

- African Americans are twice as likely as whites to be unemployed. Black males between 15 and 24 are ten times more likely to die violent deaths than are their white counterparts. Forty percent of Hispanic women do not get prenatal care.

What do you think Jeremiah would say we should do?

- Jeremiah cried for justice for widows and for children with no fathers. Forty-three percent of the homeless in the United States are families with children. Thirty-seven percent of our children live in homes without fathers. It is essential to balance the budget and to

maintain national defense, and taxes are high. At this writing, proposals range from cutting back on welfare benefits—which now average \$366 per month for a mother of two—to reducing funds for day care, to cutting back on medicare, to eliminating programs for the homeless.

What do you think Jeremiah would say?

If you wonder why the mob nearly lynched Jeremiah, consider how hard it is to discuss calmly such questions as these!

Afterword

One summer between school sessions at Maryville College, Presbyterian Gordon Stewart helped in a social work program on the streets of an inner-city Philadelphia neighborhood. He played and talked with youth, but then befriended men of the streets. "On my last day with those guys," he tells us, "they sat me down and said, 'This is your last day and we've got some things we want to say to you. We want to say thanks for being with us; but you're going back to your college and we're staying here. If you want to help us, you go back and tell your people in the suburbs that things aren't going to change for us until they change out there; because it's people in your church who own our tenements; they own our buildings and they won't fix the plumbing. They won't fix this, won't do that.

"And they went right on down the list: 'They own the ghetto.'"¹

"Fatherless families are becoming an epidemic," Vice President Gore told a recent convocation on the problem. "Nearly 6 million children live in homes without fathers."

"Has this house, which is called by *my* name, become a den of robbers . . . ?" God asked through Jeremiah (7:11). Remember that someone else came to a later Temple, quoted that phrase from Jeremiah's temple sermon, and stimulated another near lynching (Mark 11:17).

Looking Ahead

Long before television, Jeremiah knew how to make his message vivid. Read about how he did it in Jer. 18—19.

¹ As reported by Vic Jameson, in *Dear Hearts: Conversations with Presbyterians* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1994), p.21.

three

God's People **REMOLED OR SHATTERED** Jeremiah 18—19

Introduction:

The Potter and the Clay

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Pottery tells stories. Archaeologists can look at potsherds (bits of broken pottery) and can tell all kinds of things about the people who made them: the time period they lived in, their culture, their level of art, their commerce, and on and on. Jeremiah looked at the work of a potter and a different kind of story came to his mind. He tells us it was put there by God.

To vary our pattern, before looking at Jeremiah's story of the potter and the clay, let us recall a hymn. It would make a good prayer with which to begin this session.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the Potter; I am the clay.
Mold me and make me After Thy will,
While I am waiting, Yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Hold o'er my being Absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit Till all shall see
Christ only, always, Living in me!¹

And now for the story. God told Jeremiah to go to the potter's house. It was probably near a southern gate of Jerusalem. Even today in craft shops you can sometimes see potters working with wheels, often foot-propelled. He watched the clay spinning on the wheel, the craftsman gradually molding it into shape. But something went wrong. Perhaps a bit of grit had gotten into the clay. Perhaps a lump was so hard that it had not yielded to the potter's fingers. And so, patiently, the potter kneaded the clay back into a lump, started all over, and this time produced a beautiful vase.

Many people had seen that kind of thing happen, but God's prophet saw in it a lesson. "Can not I do with you, O house of Israel, just as the potter has done?" Jeremiah heard God say.

So read the story in Jer. 18:1–12 and consider these questions:

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

In what ways are the story and the hymn—obviously based on Jeremiah's story—alike?

What does the hymn add to Jeremiah's allegory?

What does Jeremiah say that the hymn does not?

¹ George C. Stebbins, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord!" as found in *The Hymnbook* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1955), No. 302.

God had called Jeremiah "to pluck up and to pull down ... to build and to plant" (1:10). Which seems to you to predominate here?

What determines what happens to the vessel, and what do you think that Jeremiah means by that?

Jeremiah uses the figure of the remolded jar to offer hope to the whole nation. Have you ever heard of a whole community being brought back to new life? If so, how did it happen?

Note that in response to Jeremiah's challenge the people simply say, "It is no use!" (18:12).

Can you give an example of that response being given to a challenge by God?

In what sense, if any, has God remolded you?

Shattered On the City Dump

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

There was no television in biblical times, but the prophets already knew how to make their messages vivid. Ahijah tore his new coat into twelve pieces to describe the coming dissolution of Israel (1 Kings 11:30). For two years Isaiah walked about Jerusalem "naked and barefoot" to protest an alliance with Egypt (Isa. 20:2). (That must have gotten people's attention!) Ezekiel built a model of Jerusalem and set up a toy army around it, then lay beside it for months to warn of the coming siege by Babylon (Ezek. 4:1—8). Jeremiah once buried his underwear for months, then dug it up to compare how it had rotted to how rotten Israel had become (Jer. 13:1—11); and at one time he wore a yoke like an ox to dramatize his warning that they were all to become slaves of Babylon (27:2). But the sermon on the city dump was the most dramatic of all.

The valley of Hinnom had been the scene of the most abominable practice Hebrews could imagine—human sacrifice. Manasseh had even sacrificed one of his own sons as a burnt offering there. Apparently that horribly pagan worship was being begun again. In the meantime the city used part of the valley as a garbage dump, burning their sewage there. In the New Testament that valley's name (in Greek, *Gehenna*) becomes the word translated "hell" (Matt. 10:28; 18:9; etc.).

Now picture a strange procession. At its head is the prophet, and behind is a delegation of priests and elders, curious to see what this preacher will say next. They hate him, but they fear that he just may be telling the truth. He has promised them a message from God. Out through what the Greek translation calls the "dung gate" he takes them to the city dump. Jeremiah carries a clay flask or pitcher, probably a rather beautiful and expensive one, with a long, narrow neck. In Hebrew it is called *a baqbuq*, from the sound when something is poured from it. Jeremiah raises that pitcher high above his head, smashes it to the ground, and announces to the crowd, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended" (19:11).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Now hear the story as it is read from Jer. 19:1–13.

What is the difference between this clay vessel and the one in chapter 18, and what do you think that implies about us?

Do you really think a loving God could deal out the punishment described in Jer. 19:10–15?

- Yes
- No, or
- In this sense _____
-

How would you have felt if you had been one of those elders who saw and heard Jeremiah that day?

We know, by the way, how the power structure did feel. When as his next act Jeremiah repeated his warning right in the Temple courtyard, they arrested him, beat him, and threw him in the stocks (20:1–2)! But that part of our story belongs to next week's lesson . . .

Afterword

Worship of the idols Jeremiah denounced is not a temptation for most of our young people. But these words of Vanderbilt Divinity School Dean Joseph Hough warn of another kind of false religion (or worth-ship) tempting our children and grandchildren. "The glorification of material things—the right shoes, the right school, the right job—is a value shared by rich and poor alike. We're all watching the same commercials. The only difference is the way people acquire things. One person might buy the BMW. Another might try to steal it. But the values are exactly the same. Material gain is the only sign of worthiness."²

People still discover that God can remold the "clay" of which we are made. An anonymous alcoholic tells how his life, including his marriage, was coming apart. Then "I found warm-hearted friends to whom my problems proved a challenge to their spirit of Christian helpfulness.... Harold [who had introduced him to Alcoholics Anonymous] kept me very busy. . . . and through him I met many friends who are true friends. I myself learned, gradually, to pray. I learned, gradually, that my prayer . . . must ask for knowledge of God's will for me, and for the power to carry that out. For the first time in my life I turned to the Bible for help. . . . I found . . . a way of life that offers a happy, useful sobriety, which, for me, must be based on faith in God and in his unfailing help. And I found constant help and friendship at the men's groups which I attended."³ In a sense, he and the men's fellowship were singing the hymn quoted at the beginning of this session.

Looking Ahead

"Burnout" hits God's prophets, too. Read one example in Jer. 20.

² As reported by Ray Waddle, in the *Nashville Tennessean* (Nov. 27, 1994) p. 20.

³ From *Faith at Work*, edited by Samuel M. Shoemaker (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1958), p. 71.

four

Hanging IN THERE

Jeremiah 20

Introduction: Burnout

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

I don't find the word "burnout" in my dictionary, but most of us know what it means. Jeremiah suffered intense job-related stress, too.

"Midway on the journey of your life, a thought stops you in your tracks: Your job bores you. Worse yet, you feel stuck. You and 30 others are competing for that same promotion. . . . Maybe just maybe—you're not as talented as you thought you were."¹

But "boredom" is not always the right word. One typical striver told his counselor, "I feel as if . . . I have to make it—because if I'm not successful in the next few years I never will be."²

But even "success" may not prevent burnout. One top executive told his counselor he had sought relief through an extra-marital affair. He didn't like it. "In the meantime he relies on tranquilizers or sleeping pills. An old prostate condition has been acting up, and he is bothered by his receding hairline. He jokes about drinking too much. The hell of it, he says, is that no one ever told him he would feel so despondent when there were no more mountains to climb." One burnout victim confesses, "I was thirty-seven years old and I was dead!"³

After an extensive study of the subject, two psychologists conclude, "The root cause of burnout lies in our existential need to believe that our lives are meaningful, that the things we do are useful, important, and even 'heroic.'"⁴

This does not seem to mean, however, that people doing noble work never burn out. Actually, the psychologists report, the highest rate of burnout they found was among nurses in cancer wards. Lawyers devoted to working for the poor last an average of two years, and people living on the job in residential treatment centers doing social work last about one year. For that matter, though many cheery preachers may profess that their brand of religion offers a sure cure, one study reports that "as many as 20 percent of America's 300,000 plus full-time clergy suffer from long-term stress."⁵

Jeremiah confronts us not with a cure for stress but with an example of endurance in spite of it. Tired, frustrated, in despair, he was certainly "stressed-out."

His story is not always pretty, and his attitude is not a model of Christian charity or even positive thinking. But what he had to go through mentally and spiritually is an important part of his story. Here is a partial list:

- After the Temple Sermon he was nearly lynched, escaping only because of an influential friend (Jer. 26).
- After the sermon in which he smashed a pot as a symbol of Jerusalem's coming destruction, he was beaten, bound in the stocks, and put on public display right in the city gate for all to abuse (20:1-2).
- People in his hometown, including relatives and former close friends, plotted to assassinate him (11:21; 12:6; 20:10). (Apparently people regarded him as a traitor because he preached that Jerusalem should surrender to Babylon rather than continue useless resistance.)
- During the last days before Jerusalem fell he was arrested, thrown into a cistern, and confined for months in the guardhouse (38:1-13).

But while he certainly did not enjoy indignities, torture, and imprisonment, and roundly cursed not only those who did these things to him but also their wives and children (18:21), what surely caused Jeremiah's deepest distress about the job to which God had called him was this: He seemed to be accomplishing nothing at all.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

To see how grieved Jeremiah was as he preached but got no results, read Jeremiah 8:18—9:2. Jeremiah is often called "the weeping prophet."

Why was it, do you suppose, that Jeremiah grieved so much?

1 Jaclyn Fierman, "Beating the Midlife Career Crisis," in *Fortune*, Sept. 6, 1993, p. 52.

2 Nancy Mayer, *The Male Mid-Life Crisis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978), p.53.

3 Nancy Mayer, *The Male Mid-Life Crisis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978), pp. 160-161.

4 Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson, *Career Burnout: Causes and Cures* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 11.

5 "Where the Hurting Pastors Go," in *Christianity Today* (November 23, 1992), p. 12.

For the response he got to the sermon we studied last week, read Jeremiah 20:1-6. How, in turn, did he respond to Pashhur?

What do you think about his talking that way to Pashhur, and about his praying to God not to forgive even his enemies' children (18:19-23)?

In what sense, if any, does God "punish" children for their fathers' sins?

Jeremiah had been trying to serve God. Now read how he feels God has treated him (20:7-8).

When, if ever, do you think it might be proper for a human being to talk to God like that?

Jeremiah has been tortured, beaten, and imprisoned. Almost without exception, the only response he has gotten is hatred and abuse. Read 20:8-9.

What is it that keeps him at this job, which he so hates?

Jeremiah 20:13 seems to be an interruption inserted by the editor, a bit of a hymn from a happier time. But read the rest of Jer. 20:10-18.

What does it add to the things we have been reading thus far?

Three More Examples

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Jeremiah was a prophet of the Lord, but he was a very human prophet. Jesus taught us not to curse our enemies but to love them (Matt. 5:43-45). Had he known of Christ's resurrection, perhaps Jeremiah could have faced his discouraging life with more hope. But in spite of his faults, Jeremiah has been compared to three other biblical characters: Job, Moses, and Jesus himself. Each of them "hung in there" in spite of difficulties and apparent hopelessness. Here are some parallels:

Job 3:1-3, 11; but also Job 19:25-27a	Jeremiah 20:14-18
Moses in Deuteronomy 9:10-18	Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Jesus in Mark 15:33-39	Jeremiah 20:7-8

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How do Job, Moses, Jeremiah, and Jesus seem to you to be alike, and how were they different as they faced apparent defeat?

(Note: The leader might want to divide the group into three—one to discuss how Moses was like Jeremiah, another to discuss parallels between Job and Jeremiah, and a third to discuss Jesus and Jeremiah.)

Why do you suppose Jeremiah kept on keeping on?

What things, if any, have helped you to keep on keeping on doing what you believed to be your responsibility, even when it seemed frustrating and futile?

Afterword

At least part of what kept Jeremiah, Moses, and Jesus going was a sense of vocation, a belief that they were doing what God had called them to do, even if it sometimes seemed that they were failing. Sam Keen writes, "To return the sense of dignity and honor to manhood, we have to stop pretending that we can make a living at something that is trivial or destructive and still have a sense of legitimate self-worth. A society in which vocation and job are separated for most people gradually creates an economy that is often devoid of spirit, one that frequently fills our pocketbooks at the cost of emptying our souls."⁶

Dr. Mark Trotter proposes four things to help us with stress:

- "Remember that what you are facing is not unique to you... . Most everybody faces problems in this life that they can't solve. . . . [People] who are spiritually mature, at one time faced what you are facing now.
- "Remember that you are a human being, not a superman. . . . Justification by faith means that all that is expected of you is that you do your best, and leave the rest to God.
- "Remember, though you are not in control, God is.
- "Be patient. . . . Watch for something to happen that you never planned."⁷

Looking Ahead

No wonder the government hated Jeremiah; he hated the government! See what he said about a nation unconcerned for the poor. But look, also, at his vision of a coming truly great King. If you can, before next time read Jer. 22:1—23:6.

⁶ Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 168.

⁷ James A. Harnish, *Men at Mid-Life: Steering Through the Detours* (Nashville: Dimensions, 1993), p. 30.

Introduction: Campaigning Against the Government

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

It is the fashion of political candidates these days to campaign against Washington, D.C., the nation's capital. Jeremiah campaigned against Jerusalem, his nation's capital. Some of the charges seem similar, but few politicians today are as inflammatory in their denunciations of the government as was the prophet of old.

Of King Shallum (also called Jehoahaz) Jeremiah prophesied—with tragic accuracy—that the unfortunate monarch would die in exile, and none of his sons would ever inherit the throne (22:11-12).

He announced—incorrectly as far as we have any record—about the next king, Jehoiakim, "With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried—dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem" (22:19).

He warned the next king, Coniah (or Jehoiachin) that God would hurl him and the Queen Mother into exile like a despised and broken pot, and none of his sons would ever reign (22:24-30). Tragically, he was right.

And to the last king, Zedekiah, he reported God as saying, "I myself will fight against you . . . in anger, in fury" (21:5), and he urged that doomed monarch's subjects to desert to the enemy (21:9)! All the horrors about which Jeremiah warned that king—slaughter, starvation, pestilence, and deportation into slavery—did come to pass, in bloody fact, in the eleventh year of his reign (39:1-10).

No wonder Judah's kings hated Jeremiah!

In the background of all these warnings there are military and political events that transformed the Middle East. The caldron from the north, which Jeremiah had seen at the time of his call, had been boiling over throughout the prophet's ministry. In 609 B.C., mighty Assyria fell to Babylon. Egypt seized the moment to gain control of Judah, but in 605 Babylonian forces defeated Egypt. The kings in Jerusalem tried to play the game of power politics by switching from one side to the other, and they desperately built the biggest army little Judah could afford.

Jeremiah, however, had no trust in either diplomatic maneuvering or military might. He was sure that Judah's security depended on something quite different from either of these. Knowing about the particular politico-military upheavals of the late seventh and early sixth century B.C. helps us understand this ancient book, but those events are in themselves of relatively little importance to us. What God's prophet said about the underlying factors that would cause Judah's fall is still relevant indeed!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What, according to 21:12, does the government need to do?

Note the three groups for which Jeremiah says the government has special responsibility (22:3).

What would you suggest might be the modern equivalent of the government showing special concern for those whom Jeremiah names:

aliens _____

the orphan _____

the widow _____

What would you suggest might be the modern equivalent of making sure that the government does not "shed innocent blood" (22:3)?

What will happen if Judah takes these responsibilities seriously (22:4—5), . . . and if it does not?

There is another problem with the government in Jerusalem that goes along with its lack of concern for justice for those in special need. Jeremiah contrasts Jehoiakim with his father, the good King Josiah (22:13-19).

On what has he spent the tax money (22:13)?

On what should he have spent it (22:15—16)?

In what ways, if any, should Jeremiah's ideas guide our government?

The Basic Problem: We the People”

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

One thing on which candidates of both major political parties agree is this: America's problems are moral and spiritual, not just matters of political technique or military might. Both Democrats and Republicans can sound like preachers as they speak of the need to restore America's virtues. So secular a magazine as *Newsweek* editorializes, "Americans are fed up with everything from teen pregnancy to drunk drivers. How do we restore a sense of right and wrong?" "What Ever Happened to Sin?" the cover story demands, and it proposes, rightly, that the responsibility for calling the nation to repent of its sin lies primarily with the church.¹

Jeremiah would say Amen! Having denounced the political leadership of his day and the people who supported it, he turns to the religious leaders. See what he says about his fellow prophets (23:14—15). At one time Jeremiah wore a yoke to symbolize Judah's coming submission to Babylon. A "prophet of the Lord" named Hananiah broke that yoke in pieces and announced that God would within two years do the same to Babylon (ch. 38). Jeremiah simply predicted—correctly—that Hananiah would die within a year. Jeremiah was sure that false religion, however good it made people feel, was no help in Judah's crisis.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

In Jeremiah's day as in ours, there were plenty of people professing to speak in the name of the Lord. What was wrong with them? (23:14)

Their message was one of comfort. Isn't that what religion is supposed to offer?

How do you think we can tell a true "prophet of the Lord" today from a false one?

At least one mark of a true religious leader is that she or he "knows the Lord." See how Jeremiah defines that term (22:16) and compare it to 1 John 4:7.

In what sense, if any, do you think that criterion distinguishes true religion from false religion today?

¹ Jonathan Alter and Pat Wingert, "The Return of Shame," in *Newsweek* (Feb. 6, 1995), p. 21.

The Coming King

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Now, however, the book presents an utterly unexpected idea. Jeremiah had been called to "pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow," (1:10), and he has surely been trying. He has denounced kings, prophets, priests, and people. But God's call was also "to build and to plant" (1:10). So now, set in utter contrast to his words of judgment on the petty despots who sat on the throne in Jerusalem, Jeremiah begins to speak of a quite different "Branch" to grow from David's royal line. This coming king will "deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved . . ." (23:5–6).

It is the Christians' faith that, in ways far beyond what even Jeremiah could envision, that Savior and King came in Jesus Christ.

Afterword

Except for Josiah, Jeremiah denounced almost every political leader of his day. Political leadership, however, as Josiah showed, is a high calling. Christian voters in this country have a responsibility to support candidates who will work for justice, especially for those in need. Presbyterian elder William Winter was defeated in his first campaign for governor of Mississippi, at least in part because his concern to end racial segregation cost him the support of the White Citizens Councils. But eventually he was elected. Governor Winter helped to promote some measure of racial justice, raise teachers' pay, create public kindergartens, and set up a program of teacher accreditation that became a model for other states. "I don't know of any other area of human activity where one person or one small group of persons can make a greater impact than in the political field," Winter says. "Because, ultimately, the political decisions that somebody has to make—that determine how life is lived in this country, how communities are organized, how basic services are provided, the quality of education, the answers to concerns about the environment, whether we kill each other or not in war—the basic questions of human existence ultimately boil down to political decisions."²

Jeremiah would appreciate Winter's words.

Looking Ahead

Jeremiah 31:31–34 is the most important passage in Jeremiah. For a curious real-estate deal, read 32:16–38. Better yet, read chs. 30—33.

² As quoted by Vic Jameson, in *Dear Hearts: Conversations with Presbyterians* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1994), p. 130.

six

Building Hope IN DESPAIR

Jeremiah 30—33

Introduction: The New Covenant

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

With chapter 31, the Book of Jeremiah takes an utterly unexpected turn: the "weeping prophet" becomes a prophet of hope! What makes this even more surprising is that he sings his songs of hope from a prison cell, and right at the moment when all his prophecies of doom are coming to pass.

At times in his ministry, it is true, Jeremiah seems to have held out at least conditional hope for Judah, *if* they would repent. (Count the number of "ifs" in the Temple Sermon, Jer. 7:2—7.) Early in his ministry he seems to have hoped that King Josiah's reforms, based on the covenant in Deuteronomy—a kind of contract God made with Israel—were giving the nation one more chance. "Hear the words of this covenant," he had pleaded (11:1).

But Josiah was killed in battle. As the situation grew worse Jeremiah became more discouraged. It seemed that he had only one message: judgment, doom. He wept. He cursed. He warned. He angrily condemned those "prophets" who assured people that God would soon make everything all right. He denounced king after king. And he told anyone who would listen that resistance to cruel Babylon was futile (20:4). Judah's sins were bringing their consequences. In the most horrible ways imaginable, Jeremiah proclaimed, Jerusalem would be destroyed (21:9; 22:26).

Ironically, in the end, King Zedekiah brought Jeremiah to the palace from the prison in which he had thrown him. "Is there any word from the LORD?" the king begged. "There is . . . You shall be handed over to the king of Babylon (37:17). Not even the fear of execution would make Jeremiah change from the truth. All the curses about which Deuteronomy, the great book of the covenant, had warned now began to be fulfilled.

Too late, many began to realize that Jeremiah had been right. Now the armies of Babylon were camped all around Jerusalem; the siege was slowly starving people to death. Lamentations records utter horror, starving mothers actually boiling and eating their own children (Lam. 4:10).

In the midst of all this misery, Jeremiah, from his prison cell, voices a completely unexpected word. Yes, the old covenant, or contract, has been broken into bits. But "[t]he days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel . . ." (Jer. 31:31). From a hopeless jail Jeremiah sings a kind of prose poem that gives the whole Bible its name. In the end he sings of a *new covenant*, a song of hope.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Jer. 31:31—34. As far as you can tell from this passage, what was the basis of the old covenant (or contract)?

What went wrong with that covenant?

How will the New Covenant be different?

Look now at the title page of your Bible. You will be reminded that our Bible is in two parts: the Old Testament (or Covenant) and the New Testament (or Covenant).

Why, do you suppose, editors for so many centuries have used this passage from Jeremiah as one basis for naming the whole of Scripture?

Now read 1 Corinthians 11:25. Jesus says that at last, "This is the New Covenant." In the light of Jeremiah's preaching and of Jesus' death the day after Jesus made this announcement, what do you think God is contracting to do when you take communion, drinking the cup of the New Covenant?

What are you contracting to do or be?

History's Strangest Real-Estate Deal

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Jeremiah 30—33 is often called "Jeremiah's Little Book of Comfort." Set in the midst of prophecies of gloom and doom, these chapters shine out with faith and hope. How could the prophet get people to believe the good news he was now proclaiming?

"Put your money where your mouth is," says a popular challenge. Jeremiah did that, almost literally. To his dungeon now comes his cousin Hanamel with an offer to sell him the family farm at Anathoth. What a bargain! Probably the Babylonian army had troops camped on that land right at that moment. Jeremiah has known for a long time what his cousin now is realizing: they are all to be carried off into captivity. No farm would be worth anything, now.

But Jeremiah buys it! He pays good money for it. He has the deed notarized.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read the story in Jeremiah 32:6-15.

Why in the world, do you suppose, would Jeremiah invest in real estate at such a time?

Why do you suppose he had the deed of sale legally witnessed by Baruch?

What relevance, if any, do you see for us today in the promise God made to Jeremiah long ago (32:37-41)?

Jeremiah's is a story of hope in a hopeless time. What helps you when you get discouraged?

And note how once again our editor has placed here the promise of the coming great king (33:14-16; compare to 23:5-6).

Afterword

In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, believers claim again their place among the people of God's New Covenant. God has acted for us with amazing grace, and renews that action in this contract ceremony. We renew our covenant vows. Among the things that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) says officially about the Lord's Supper and the two sides of the Covenant is this:

In this meal the church celebrates the joyful feast of the people of God, and anticipates the great banquet and marriage supper of the Lamb. Brought by the Holy Spirit into Christ's presence, the church eagerly expects and prays for the day when Christ shall come in glory and God be all in all. Nourished by this hope, the church rises from the Table and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission to the world, to proclaim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace until Christ's Kingdom shall come at last. . . . In preparing to receive Christ in this Sacrament, the believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus.¹

We live in a time when a worse destruction than that which befell Jerusalem seems possible. Perhaps something of Jeremiah's hope, in a time when human sin seems to have wiped out all grounds for hope, is echoed in these words from Will Campbell:

God created the world and gave it to us. We're pretty much in charge of it in this era. Some people think I am in a state of despair, but I'm not. Because even if we exercise our freedom to the point of blowing up the universe, which we are free to do and are capable of doing, that is not going to be the last word. Being convinced of that is enough to keep me going.²

Looking Ahead

The late sports reporter Howard Cosell used to boast that he would "tell it like it is." So does the Bible. The last chapters of Jeremiah deal with three tragedies: the end of the kingdom of Judah, the end of Jeremiah himself, and the coming judgment on nation after nation.

¹ From *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1989), W-2.4007; W-2.4011.

² As quoted in *Questions of Faith: Contemporary Thinkers Respond*, edited by Dolly K. Patterson (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 22.

seven

Enduring TO THE TRAGIC END

Jeremiah 34—52

Introduction: The Fate of Jerusalem

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

In 587 B.C., the end came. It was sheer horror. Recall the pictures you have seen of refugees from Rwanda and you can visualize the scene. For a year-and-a-half the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem and simply waited for the people to starve. Women boiled and ate their own children. Diseases gnawed at bloated bellies. At last the Babylonian horde broke through, slaughtering those who resisted. Their political advisers met with the generals at the city gate, the traditional courthouse of Israelite cities, to plan the next step. King Zedekiah attempted to escape, but his effort to run away was futile.

The Babylonians caught him. They killed his sons before his eyes. Then they blinded him, so that the last thing he would ever see was the death of his boys. And systematically they began the mass deportation to Babylon of hundreds of now-enslaved men, women, and children.

Read the tragic story in Jer. 39:1-10.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Note: These questions ask what a reporter might say and what Jeremiah might say if interviewed by a reporter. The leader might like to ask two men to role-play the reporter and the prophet.

What would you guess a newspaper or television reporter would have said were the major causes of the fall of Jerusalem?

Review in your mind the book of Jeremiah as we have studied it. If our reporter had interviewed Jeremiah, what do you think Jeremiah would have said were the major causes of the fall of Jerusalem?

In what ways, if any, would you agree with each view? Why?

The Fate of Jeremiah

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

At first it looked as though Jeremiah himself might survive very well. Knowing that he had advocated surrender to Babylon, the Babylonians regarded him as an ally, rescued him from prison, and offered him a chance at a good position in Babylon. Jeremiah, however, chose to stay with the impoverished remnants whom the Babylonians did not bother to take as slaves. The conquerors placed him under the protection of Gedaliah, the Jew they had made governor of those pitiful survivors (40:1-6). (Gedaliah's father, Ahikam, had been Jeremiah's protector after the Temple Sermon (26:24).)

Even that bit of security soon fell apart. Gedaliah was assassinated (41:1-3). Against his will, Jeremiah was carried off by a group who hoped to escape Babylonian tyranny by fleeing to Egypt (43:1-7). Soon they turned against him. He railed against their continued idolatry. They replied that Jerusalem fell because they had neglected the pagan goddess "the Queen of Heaven." And so Jeremiah's last recorded words may be those oracles of doom he pronounced against Egypt and the Jews who had fled there. You can read them in Jeremiah 44:24-30. (Incidentally, the pharaoh whom Jeremiah said would be delivered "into the hands of his enemies" was eventually assassinated by a rival.)

Apparently Jeremiah finally died in Egypt, an exile still uttering prophecies of doom.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Israel had been unfaithful, and so it was destroyed by a just God. But Jeremiah had been faithful to his call by God, yet his fate was scarcely better than that of the most sinful Jews. Here are some possible explanations. What truth, if any, do you find in each of these?

- *God really is not 'just.' Bad things happen to good people.*

- *We can see God's justice at work if we look at the history of whole nations over many years. It is not so clear with individuals.*

- *The Book of Job sheds light on the problem by saying:*

- *Other*

Some forty years before, God had called Jeremiah. In response, he had spent a lifetime pleading with Jerusalem to repent. They had not repented; he had failed. Nebuchadrezzar, King of Babylon, succeeded.

In what sense, if any, would you rather be a "failure" in the pattern of Jeremiah than a "success" like Nebuchadrezzar?

The Fate of Other Nations

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Israel, of course, was not the only nation to be judged by God because of its sins. Jeremiah 46-51 is a series of oracles or prophecies against various nations. Several other books of prophecy in the Old Testament contain

sections like this one, devoted to warnings to Israel's pagan neighbors (Isa. 13—23; Ezek. 25—32; Amos 1:2—2:3). These nations are not condemned for neglecting God's covenant; God had not made a covenant with them like the one with Israel. They are not condemned for disobeying God's law; they did not have that law. But they are judged for violations of morality that any people, even those who had never heard of the Lord, should recognize. Some historians suggest that some of these poems come from prophets other than Jeremiah, but they were so obviously inspired that devout scribes preserved them by copying them into the Jeremiah scroll. The particular fates of these nations is a matter of ancient history. The sins that were to bring their downfall are still very much with us.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Here are examples of three nations—Egypt, Moab, and Babylon—and their sins. With each of these:
 (a) try putting into your own words the sin of that nation;

(b) see if you can name a nation that in ancient or recent history fell in part as a result of that sin; and

(c) consider what meaning, if any, Jeremiah's warning to that ancient nation has for the United States of America today.

Egypt—Jer. 46:17

Moab—Jer. 48:7

Babylon itself—Jer. 51:24

Afterword

"Oh Where Have All the Dictators Gone?" So *Newsweek* headlined a brief article recently. It consisted largely of pictures, a rogues gallery of dictators, all of whom have been exiled from their nations. Among them were Raoul Cedras, now out of Haiti; Ferdinand Marcos, forced out of the Philippines to die in Hawaii; Manuel Noriega of Panama, now serving a forty-year term in an American prison on drug charges; Erich Honecker, East German dictator forced to defend himself against charges of murder, who died in exile in Chile; Anastasio Somoza, forced out of Nicaragua to exile in Paraguay, where he was assassinated; and so on down the list. God still judges nations and their governments.

Here is a saying that applies to Jeremiah. Perhaps it applies to you. "God does not call us to succeed, but to obey."

Looking Ahead

Jeremiah was a weeping prophet, and most of his book is oracles of judgment. But Jeremiah was remembered, as well, for his promises of hope in God. "But as for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and no one shall make him afraid" (46:27). In the midst of his oracles of doom we read that song of joyful anticipation. His prophecy came true. When at last Babylon fell and the Jewish slaves were allowed to return, they knew how this had come about. It was "in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished" (Ezra 1:1). Jeremiah had promised their return.

Even Jeremiah's words about judgment strengthened the faith of Jewish slaves. Through him they understood that they were in exile not because their God had been defeated, but because they had been unfaithful.

Not only Jeremiah's words, but also his life inspired them. Some have suggested that Jeremiah, faithful in spite of rejection and torture, became the model for the Suffering Servant of Isa. 53, fulfilled in Jesus.

And so Jeremiah points us to the New Testament. The night before he died, when Jesus wanted to explain the meaning of the Lord's Supper, it was to Jeremiah's promise of the New Covenant that he turned. Read how the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews could see that concept binding together the ceremonies of the Old Testament with the cross of the New (Heb. 10:11-17). In a real sense, Jeremiah prefigures our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Writer

William M. Ramsay is Professor Emeritus and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Bethel College in McKenzie, Tennessee, where he was the Hannibal Seagle Professor of Philosophy and Religion from 1979-92. He studied at Rhodes College and Union Theological Seminary, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

Among his publications are *The Layman's Guide to the New Testament* and *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, along with numerous church school curriculum materials. He was also a columnist for *Presbyterian Outlook* for seventeen years.

Ramsay is married to De Vere Maxwell Ramsay, an author and adjunct professor of Christian education. They have two sons and four grandsons.

What People Are Saying About the Men's Bible Study Series

"I found the study materials and questions among the most refreshing of any Bible study materials I have ever seen within the Presbyterian Church for men. Thanks so much for doing them. . ."

*Bill Richard
Presbyterian Stone Church
Ogdensburg, New York*

"We would like more of this kind of study."

*Jim Palmer
First Presbyterian Church
Bellevue, Washington*

"(The) men had been so used to listening to lecture type Sunday School lessons (that) I was afraid that drawing them into a discussion would be like pulling teeth. The surprise came on that first Sunday morning when all ten men in the class chimed in with their thoughts."

*Gene Wylie
First Presbyterian Church
Vicksburg, Mississippi*

"An excellent presentation. . . with good balance between Biblical work and reflection. Questions with contemporary applications are nicely done."

*Dr. Youngil Cho
National President (1993-1995)
Presbyterian Men*