

Wise words for perplexing times

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[0 : 00] So let's now turn to our scripture reading, which is in the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah chapter 8, and we're on page 636.

We're going to read from chapter 8, verse 18, to the end of chapter 9. A few weeks ago, we looked at the great temple sermon of Jeremiah, where he condemned the institution which had turned its back on the Lord and called for holiness of life, for repentance.

And now he continues in chapter 8, verse 18. My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. My heart is sick within me.

Behold the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land. Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her?

Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols? The harvest is past. The summer is ended, and we are not saved.

[1 : 09] But the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.

Oh, that I had in the desert a traveler's lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them. For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men.

They bend their tongue like a bow. Falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land, for they proceed from evil to evil. And they do not know me, declares the Lord.

Let everyone beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother. For every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer.

[2 : 13] Everyone deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth. They have taught their tongue to speak lies. They weary themselves committing iniquity, heaping oppression upon oppression, and deceit upon deceit.

They refuse to know me, declares the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I will refine them and test them. For what else can I do because of my people?

Their tongue is a deadly arrow. It speaks deceitfully. Each with his mouth, each speaks peace to his neighbor. But in his heart, he plans an ambush for him.

Shall I not punish them for these things, declares the Lord? Shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? I will take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through.

And the lowing of cattle is not heard. Both the birds of the air and the beasts have fled and are gone. I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals.

[3 : 26] I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant. Who is the man so wise that he can understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken that he may declare it?

Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through? And the Lord says, Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, have not obeyed my voice or walked in accord with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts and gone after the Baals, as their fathers taught them.

Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will feed this people with bitter food and give them poisonous water to drink.

I will scatter them among the nations whom neither they nor their fathers have known, and I will send a sword after them until I have consumed them. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider and call for the mourning women to come.

Send for the skillful women to come. Let them make haste and raise a wailing over us, that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids flow with water.

[4 : 42] For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion. How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings.

Hear, O woman, the word of the Lord, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth. Teach to your daughters a lament, and each to her neighbor a dirge.

For death has come up into our windows. It has entered our palaces, cutting off the children from the streets, and the young men from the squares. Speak, thus declares the Lord, the dead bodies of men shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves after the reaper, and none shall gather them.

Thus says the Lord, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches.

But let him who boasts, boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

[5 : 55] For in these things I delight, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh.

Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert, who cut the corners of their hair. For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us as we think over it. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 636.

Let's have a moment of prayer. One of the greatest and most colorful figures in the history of preaching was the 18th century preacher, George Whitefield.

who was mightily used by God, and brought many to the Lord, both in this side of the water, and in America. One woman once said to him, Mr. Whitefield, why do you always preach on you must be born again?

[7 : 19] And Whitefield replied, Madam, because you must be born again. And that's why he kept on repeating that message, month after month, year after year, you must be born again.

But if you've read Whitefield's sermons, they're very powerful even on paper, but it must have been a most inspiring and a most thrilling experience listening to him.

The great Shakespearean actor, who often went to listen to him, not particularly accepting his preaching or his theology, but loving the way that he spoke and inspired by the way he presented his message, once said he wished he could pronounce even Mesopotamia the way that Whitefield did.

I've tried it. I can't make it work either. But he kept on repeating this message. And that's very like what Jeremiah is doing.

In one sense, Jeremiah's message is fairly simple. Disobedience and ingratitude will bring judgment. And the only hope is in the faithfulness of the covenant God.

[8 : 33] In a sense, that's what he's saying from chapters 1 to 52. And in a sense, that's if we grasp that and nothing else about the book of Jeremiah, we have grasped something very important.

And yet, I'm pretty sure some people, as this passage was being read today, would have thought, we're only at chapter 9. There are 52 chapters to go.

We're going to lose the will to live if it goes on like this. Now, important point to remember, and I made this at the very beginning, is that Jeremiah is not a harsh and vindictive individual.

Indeed, the use of the word Jeremiah to refer to such a person is a caricature or to talk about a ranting speech sometimes as a Jeremiahd is nothing more than a travesty.

Because this passage, look back at chapter 8, verse 18 and following, and into chapter 9, verse 1, Jeremiah loves the people he is speaking to.

[9 : 40] He weeps and weeps for them. Indeed, chapter 9, verse 1, is one of the passages which gives him the name the weeping prophet, which he is often called.

You see, Jeremiah had no authority to change the message any more than Whitefield did, any more than we do. He had one responsibility, and that responsibility is ours as well, to deliver the message.

Whatever it said, however harsh it seemed, however unpalatable it was to deliver it, he had to preach judgment. He's not judgmental.

That's an important thing. Judgmentalism is a very different thing from proclaiming God's judgment. Judgmentalism is when we take it upon ourselves to criticize everyone and everything in a harsh and in an unpleasant manner.

So that's the first thing. Jeremiah has this basic message, disobedience and ingratitude will bring judgment. The only hope is in the faithfulness of the covenant God.

[10 : 47] And you may remember I gave the title to this whole series, The Prophet of the Costly New Covenant. The second point I want to make is this. This is not empty repetition.

Just as Whitefield said an awful lot more than you must be born again. So Jeremiah is like a great musical work or a great poem where themes, motifs come over and over again, but they're always coming in different ways.

And what we need to ask when we come to a passage like this is what specifically does this passage contribute to the overall message? What is the particular lesson from this passage?

Now as I said already I think that these sermons are not necessarily in chronological order. We don't know when Jeremiah delivered them. Now if you're quoting somebody, say a preacher or a politician or somebody who speaks a great deal, there are two ways to be faithful to what they say.

One is to quote what they said on a specific situation. The other of which is equally faithful is to take their general thrust of what they say over a period of time and to analyze the essence of that.

[12 : 07] Very probably we've got beyond the days of the good King Josiah and his reformation here to the weak and vicious kings who followed him. And I think there is a key to this chapter.

There are two keys in fact in verse and the key I think is 9, 12 to 16 who is the man so wise that he understands this?

And then again 9, 23 thus says the Lord not let not the wise man boast in his wisdom and so on.

Jeremiah is saying what can we say in a time like this? How can we account? How can we read the signs of the times? Now by reading the signs of the times I don't mean these fanatical people who predict that the world is going to end on such and such a time.

The least of course were the Mayans who unlike every other prediction these predictions are futile and empty. And talking about how the Lord is saying through Jeremiah the only way to understand what's happening now is through wisdom and the wisdom that comes from the true knowledge of God.

[13 : 20] Not just research into the times. Now there is human wisdom which is valuable we'll come back to that but this is the wisdom that comes from God. That's why I'm calling that's why I'm calling this wise words for perplexing times.

The times are perplexing they're difficult to understand just as our times are perplexing and difficult to understand. Wise words for perplexing times.

And I want to say two things two main points. First of all understanding the times. That's verses 12 to 16. What I'm doing is I'm taking these passages and working outwards from them to look at the whole passage.

As you know there are different ways you can be faithful to scripture. You can go through verse by verse which is very appropriate say in the New Testament letters a letter like Romans or in poetic works like this it's often better to focus on a particular image or idea and see how this illuminates the whole thing.

So understanding the times. Verse 12 Who is the man so wise that he can understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken? Now you'll notice the a man so wise is defined as someone to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

[14 : 46] You get this in the prophecy you get this in Isaiah who has heard our report who has understood what the Lord is saying to us. So you see what Jeremiah is saying is wisdom comes from listening to the word of God.

That is where true God in his wisdom for our learning gave his inspired and holy word. So he sang a moment or two ago. You notice this Jeremiah's technique diagnosis followed by remedy.

The times are perplexing because people have rejected God's wisdom. Now the commentators say that this is a digression verses 12 to 16.

I don't think it's a digression at all obviously. I think this is the key to what Jeremiah is saying. What's happening? First of all they have rejected they have forsaken the law.

Verse 13. The law is the Torah Genesis to Deuteronomy the words of Moses which are the words of God. When we study the Pentateuch Exodus and Deuteronomy we find that obedience is the key.

[15 : 58] Before the tabernacle was built before the sacrificial system was set up the key to it was listening to and obeying the word of God. They have forsaken my law they have not obeyed my voice.

Why? Because they have listened to deceiving words. Verse 5. Everyone deceives his neighbor no one speaks the truth they have taught their tongue to speak lies.

This is a recurring theme in Jeremiah. Jeremiah is not the only voice that's being heard. There are dozens of other voices but these voices are leading people astray and they're leading people astray because they are not listening to the word of God.

You'll notice it says verse 14 have stubbornly followed their own hearts as their fathers have taught them. See if you read back in the story they're hardly in the promised land when this kind of thing is happening.

Read the book of Judges then read on of course to the story of Elijah. And it's the same for us if we don't follow good teaching we'll follow bad teaching.

[17 : 11] There's no such thing as a neutral approach. We either listen to the truth or we listen to lies. We either obey the voice of God or we obey essentially the voices of our own desires.

That's why the word of God needs to be taught to every new generation and indeed to every generation as it grows older. You can't say we've taught the word of God.

I've heard this said actually once at a minister's conference they were discussing what they were going to do the following year. Somebody said we've done the Bible this year let's do something more interesting next year.

Now that's the kind of thing that's actually said. It's not at all surprising that this particular denomination is declining and disappearing. I'm not talking about it.

I'm not talking actually about any denomination that you'll know about. I'm simply that this is what happens. We've done the Bible. Brothers and sisters we've never done the Bible.

[18 : 13] It's impossible. The Bible is inexhaustible. So they've turned their backs on the truth. Turned their backs on the word. And the second thing that's happened is by forsaking wisdom they become self centered.

Verse 14 have stubbornly followed their own heart and gone after the Baals. Sometimes this plural here is because the word Baal or Baal is simply the word for Lord or God.

And Elijah says this to Ahab in fact you've forsaken the law of the Lord and followed the Baals. Local godlets whom people worship. Now why was this worship so popular?

It combined two things. First of all it combined the sense of the supernatural and the desire to enjoy ourselves. By the way both these things are good things.

The sense of God, the sense of the supernatural is God given. God has put eternity in our hearts. Enjoying ourselves is also something implanted in our hearts.

[19 : 19] After all the catechism said this long ago to enjoy him forever. It's not a case that people simply overnight went from following Yahweh, following the Lord, to following Baal.

It was a gradual slide. This wrong thinking led to wrong living. They have not walked in accord with it, stubbornly followed their own hearts.

And you'll notice there is a deliberate decision here. Very often people slide into false teaching, into bad thinking, and into false living. But this is a deliberate decision here.

And the key to it all is they do not know me. They don't know me, says the Lord. And verse 2 develops this.

They are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongues like a bow. Falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land, for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me.

[20 : 31] So they reject, they forsake the word of God. They become self-centered, and thirdly, this leads to bitter and poisonous results. Verse 15. This is a metaphor for the state of the nation, bitter food and poisonous waters to drink.

prophets often use metaphors like this. Isaiah talks about the body politic as a body which is full of diseases from head to foot.

This is not the Lord leading them in green pastures besides still waters and feeding them. They've decided they prefer bitter food and poisonous water which leads to death.

And you get the detail of that, for example, in verses 4 to 6, the distrust that is bred in a society like this. Let everyone beware of his neighbor and put no trust in any brother.

And the deliberate telling of lies, they have taught, verse 5, their tongue to speak lies. This is the inward state of the nation, and the outward state of the nation is described in verses 20 to 22.

[21 : 48] Death, verse 21, has come up into our windows. It has entered our palaces. So, death here.

Not just people dying, but this is death as a power that grips human society. Very much the emphasis that Paul has in Romans 8, sorry, Romans 5.

sin came into the world, and death by sin. Death, as I say, not just individual dying, but this cosmic power that grips society.

And back in verses 10 to 11, weeping and wailing, the desolate land, like the judgment of the flood. So much of this is drawn from the early chapters of the Bible.

It's interesting, actually, if you read the prophets, you'll often find a drawing from the early chapters of Genesis, they're not actually quoting, but the references are there. Death is a predator.

[22 : 47] This vivid image, verse 21, come up into our windows, entered our palaces. Death is not put aside simply by luxurious dwellings.

He'll enter there as much as he'll enter a hovel. And, of course, he's not, he's no respecter of age either. Children from the streets, young men from the squares.

This is the cosmic power. This is the last enemy, as Paul says, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Until then, haunting and troubling humanity.

It's a horrific picture, but once again, the key is in verse 12. who is the man so wise that he can understand this? Look around at the world. Look around at the chaos, the devastation.

Look at the breakup of society. Look at the wholesale turning from the word of God. Why is it? It is because people don't know the Lord.

[23 : 56] To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken that he may declare it? Now, Jeremiah, of course, is the answer to that question. He has spoken to Jeremiah, who is declaring it.

That's the first point. Now, secondly, I want us to look at responding and repenting because of the times, understanding the times, and because of these times, responding and repenting.

That brings us to verses 23 to 24. Once again, you see, this is not an interpolation, as so many of the commentators say.

Jeremiah is building up his case, and Jeremiah is doing it in all kinds of ways. There are poems with vivid imagery, and then he applies the poems.

So often the prophets do this. They give vivid imagery, and then they apply them, because it's perfectly easy to misunderstand vivid imagery unless they're applied. Get this a great deal in apocalyptic literature, in Daniel, and in the book of Revelation.

[25 : 01] We have these magnificent, terrifying images. Then the prophets, as we are, stands aside and said, look, this is what it means. This is a radical call to think wisely and to act wisely.

And this takes a bit further what verses 12 and following had said. Here in particular, it's the deceitfulness of the human heart. So what is the wise reaction?

question. First of all, Jeremiah says, stop boasting about our achievements. Now, this is, you see what I mean, this is a deeper thought.

Basically, they say, turn away from all falseness. Turn away from the bowels. Turn away from human wisdom and human learning. Don't depend on them. But the interesting thing here is, they turn away even from the good things.

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, might, and riches. Interesting thing, these are all good things in themselves. Wisdom, in the sense of human culture, human education, and so on, is good and right.

[26 : 18] Don't be the last person to deny that. There's tremendous amount of good in human culture, in education, in music, poetry, literature, architecture, all these things.

And I think if you read the last chapters of the Bible, you'll find that the kings of the earth, says John, will bring their treasures into the city, which I think means that all that is good, all that is right, all that is honorable in human culture, will be transformed and have part of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Might. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. What is might? Might is essentially the power to do things, isn't it? And it's important to have that power.

Riches. Now, no one wants to be in poverty. No one actually thinks that poverty is a good thing. So, what's Jeremiah saying?

Jeremiah is saying this, these things are good, but they are gifts. They are not achievements. If God has given you wisdom, if God has given you might, if God has given you riches, we must not boast on them, we must not depend on them.

[27 : 38] Remember the church in Laodicea, I am rich, I have plenty of goods, I don't need anything. And how did the Lord see that same church? You are poor, miserable, wretched, naked, and blind.

This verse is saying, where's our confidence? What do we actually rely on? Do we rely on our own achievements, or do we rely on the living God? Thank him for those gifts.

The book of Ecclesiastes looks at this in a different way. It says it takes the kind of lifestyle of Solomon, if you like, his wealth, his power, his learning, his social activities, and so on.

These are all good things, but if you depend on what did they end up in? They end up in Hevel, nothing, a puff of wind, they end up in idolatry. So that's the first thing he's saying, stop boasting about achievement, even good achievements.

What do you have? What do we have except what we received? But the second thing is love and know the Lord. Verse 24, let him who boasts boast in this that he understands and knows me.

[28 : 57] Paul says, God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the cross of Christ my God, as the hymn says.

You see, he's been, Jeremiah's been talking about covenant breaking. Now he talks about the lifestyle of the covenant. There are three great words in verse 24, which are at the very heart of our relationship with the Lord, at the very heart of the covenant.

Verse 24, I am the Lord who practices steadfast love. The great word that runs through the whole of the Old Testament, the word that means God's special commitment to the people whom he's made a covenant, showing his own character, love which does not count the cost, love which is not turned aside by the worst in us, and of course not impressed by the best in us either, because it is unconditional love.

Boast in that. I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom, but I will boast in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.

That's what Jeremiah is saying. The next great word is justice, mishpeth, justice, the very character of God, freedom for the oppressed, freedom from fear, freedom from all the things that make life miserable and unkind.

[30 : 38] And then the great word righteousness, what God is and what he gives us in the gospel. That's Romans 1, is it not?

The righteousness of God, which can become ours by grace through faith. Remember the story of Martin Luther, all his bitter penances, all his efforts to attain the righteousness of God, until he realized in a flash of revelation that the righteousness of God was a forgiving righteousness.

And that's what covenant living is about. Always remember Wesley's words, I offered Christ to them.

Ultimately, brothers and sisters, that's all we have to offer. We offer ourselves. Then people are going to be turned away from the gospel if they start disliking us, aren't they?

And we tend to offer ourselves, don't we? Friendly, growing, lively, all these words occur in church websites. I offered Christ to them.

[31 : 52] Even if these things are true, they are gifts, they're not achievements. And it would really, and if we realize this fully, it would free the people of God from having wrong thoughts about ourselves and about each other.

If we really gave thanks to God for our leaders, rather than setting them up on an impossible pedestal which no human being can possibly stand on, and then criticizing and denigrating themselves if they inevitably fall off that pedestal because they are human.

Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me. These are gifts, they're not achievements, and we thank God for them, use them for his glory.

What about verses 25 and 26? My favorite commentator on Jeremiah disappointed me here. He said there is no connection with the preceding verses, but I think there's a very, very close connection, and the connection is verse 25, behold the days are coming.

When you read that in the prophets or the day or the days are coming, this is talking about the day of the Lord, the day when God will judge the world in righteousness and when everything false will be exposed and everything true will be shown for what it is.

[33 : 30] And that's why he's talking about circumcision. Circumcision here is used as a metaphor for the whole of external religion. It was the sign of the covenant. It was an external sign.

And right from the very beginning, Moses himself says the important thing is not circumcision of the body, but circumcision of the heart. In other words, knowing the Lord.

You see, religion is very easy because there are certain external rules you can follow. Very straightforward. That's why the devil loves religion because he brings people into bondage to rules and regulations.

Jeremiah is saying the days are coming when the truth will be revealed and the falsehood will be exposed. And that's the connection.

The wise person listens to the word of God and the wise person realizes there will come a day when that word will be seen to be true. In many ways you could sum up the message of the prophets as God will be God and the world will know it.

[34 : 37] Now God is God at the moment. Most of the world don't know it. But in a sense all the second coming will do is actually show the reality that God is God, that Christ reigns, that he will return and set up his kingdom.

See, Jeremiah is always looking to the future, looking to the new covenant, the only way that will change us in the present. But not the only way that will change us in the present, the only way that will help us to persevere.

The gospel by which we come to the Lord Jesus Christ is the gospel which will keep us, keep us faithful, because that is a gospel which is looking to the future.

And Jeremiah is effectively saying, wisdom will not only be the right way to live in this world, but wisdom will be shown on that last day.

When everything is revealed and the thoughts of everyone are made known, then that will be shown to have been the right way to live, and that is the way to persevere, is it not?

[35 : 43] Amen. Let's pray. Amen. God our Father, we are so fickle. Holy living eludes us, and so often as in the words of Augustine we sang, our hearts turn to lesser beauties.

Father, we pray that as we study your word, as we listen to your word, that this word may indeed mold and shape us as we sang the beginning, living stones in your eternal temple.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.