

A voice for God in dangerous times

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to our Bible reading this morning, and Bob is going to be preaching this morning, and he's going to be starting a series on the book of Jeremiah, which will run interspersed with other things over the next while.

We'll be back to Genesis next Sunday morning, but Bob's starting Jeremiah this morning, so we're going to read together Jeremiah chapter 1. You'll find that if you have one of our church Bibles in page 627.

Otherwise, it's sort of about the middle of your Bible, after the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah then Jeremiah. And we'll read together the whole of Jeremiah chapter 1.

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah, the son of Ammon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

It came also in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

[1 : 18] Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I consecrated you.

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Then I said, Ah, Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.

But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth. For to all to whom I send you, you shall go. And whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

[2 : 24] And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch. And the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.

The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, What do you see? And I said, I see a boiling pot facing away from the north.

Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord, and they shall come.

And everyone shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls, and around and against all the cities of Judah. And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me.

They have made offerings to other gods, and worship the works of their own hands. But you, dress yourself for work. Arise, and say to them, Everything that I command you, do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them.

[3 : 42] And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Amen.

May God bless to us this, his word. Now, could I ask you to have your Bibles open, please, at Jeremiah chapter 1, which is on page 267, and we'll have a moment of prayer.

Let's pray. God our Father, we believe you have things to say to us, not just what Jeremiah once said, long ago, but words that through Jeremiah, you are speaking to us today.

And so I pray, Lord, that you will take my human words, in all their weakness, in all their limitations, that you will use them faithfully, to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

[5 : 00] Amen. Caricatures can be very funny, as well as very wounding.

Some of you may remember the program, Splitting Images, and the puppets, then, which caricatured and satirized, the leading political figures of the time.

So I say, very funny often, but very cruel. But surely, no caricature can be more cruel, and more misleading, than the caricature in people's minds, when you mention the word, Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is, in popular parlance, a harsh and gloomy individual, who spreads doom and gloom.

Someone who is continually pessimistic, continually harsh, continually judgmental.

And we, of course, have the word, Jeremiah, which means an angry tirade, the kind of speech, that fills everybody with despair, and opens no gate of hope, at all.

[6 : 06] Nothing could be further, from the truth. That's why, I'm calling this series, Jeremiah, not Jeremiah, the prophet of doom and gloom, but, Jeremiah, the prophet, of the costly new covenant.

Because that's what, all Jeremiah's preaching, all Jeremiah's living, is leading to. He's speaking about, the new covenant. As Willie said, over the months, we're going to be looking, at this prophet, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the evening, as we did with Samuel, and earlier on, with Revelation and Kings.

And we're going to try, to listen, to his message. It's a book, of daunting length. It's complicated.

Indeed, Calvin, in his great commentary, says, I hope the Lord, gives me life, and strength, to finish this.

That, that raised many echoes, in my own heart. Although my, this series, is not going too long, as Calvin, as Calvin's commentary, which runs to, three daunting volumes, in small print, and no pictures, to break it up.

Very far, from being the prophet, of doom, and gloom, Jeremiah is sometimes, called the weeping prophet. The prophet, whose heart, was breaking, over the situation, of his people.

[7 : 26] He's not a prophet, of cheap grace, of course. This is costly grace. And, unusually, there's a great deal, told about his life. There are many stories, about Jeremiah, many stories, of his time, because that forms, part of his ministry.

And, few people, in the Old Testament, point so clearly, to the Lord Jesus Christ, himself.

Remember, we sang, to a world, which crucifies, faithful prophets, of the Lord.

Jeremiah's life, was one long crucifixion, one long agony. And, these are parts, of his message. So, today, we look, at a voice for God, in dangerous times.

That's our title, for this morning. And, let's look then, first of all, at those dangerous times, in verses one to three. The first three verses. The scene is set, and some important things, are said.

Notice the parallel, the words, of Jeremiah, and then verse two, the word, of the Lord. Now, these two things, are not collapsing, to each other.

[8 : 31] It's not that Jeremiah, was perfect. It's not that Jeremiah, didn't have to work hard, at his message. It is, that this message, was not just the words, of Jeremiah, but the word, of the Lord.

And that means, of course, it's a message, for today. If it were simply, the words of Jeremiah, it would be interesting, for those who are interested, in ancient history. But it's not.

It's a word, for today. He is a voice, for God, to speak, not only his own words, but God's words. His personality, matters.

God speaks truth, through personality, after all. And God shows, not a brash, macho, bullish type, the kind of person, ready to take on, the world.

Indeed, he didn't choose, a Jeremiah, in the popular sense, at all. He chose, a modest, timid, youthful individual, to do it, to do this task, and to do it, for 40 years.

[9 : 32] Imagine you young people, of that same voice, speaks to you, today. I want you, to speak, my words, and I want you, to keep on doing it, all through your career, all through your life.

Because, this is, the same voice, that spoke, to Jeremiah. It's a time of turmoil, time of world convulsion.

Israel, being a small country, was always in danger, from the great powers, and particularly, the great powers, from the north. Verse 14, the Lord said to me, out of the north, disaster shall be let

loose, on all the inhabitants, of the land.

And in the region, we now call Iraq, two great empires, battled, all the, during most of the, Old Testament period, Assyria, and Babylon.

When Jeremiah prophesies, the great Assyrian empire, was lurching to its end, but Babylon, is rising. And there's the ominous word, here in verse 3, until the captivity, of Jerusalem, until the exile, of Jerusalem.

[10 : 41] This exile, this captivity, challenged, every part, of Israel's faith. This is what, C.S. Lewis would call, a pilgrim's regress. Brought, Abraham had been called, out of this land, many, many centuries, before.

And now, God's people, are going to be taken, back to Babylon. Where is God? Is he weaker now? Than the gods, of Babylon. What about the temple?

The temple is going, to be destroyed. And we'll, a few weeks time, we'll look at the so-called, temple sermon, of Jeremiah. What about, the Davidic king? What's going to happen, when there is no king, on David's throne?

And do you see, the significance of this? Jeremiah knew, right from the beginning, that people were not, going to respond, to his message. People knew, this was going to end, in tragedy, in disaster, in exile.

What would we do, if we knew, for certain, that the gospel, was not going, to be listened to? That decline, of the church, was going to continue?

[11 : 45] That unbelief, was going to grow greater? What would we do? The answer is here, in this book, we keep on preaching, that gospel, because it is, the living word of God, so we'll come to, in a moment.

And that very judgment, of course, is going to show, that the word, is going to be fulfilled. And his, prophecy is, in the days of Josiah, king of Judah.

Josiah, we know, was a godly king. Josiah, instituted a great reformation, so it's very probable, that Jeremiah, begins to preach, before the king's, reforms, had really begun, to take effect.

And later on, I think it's in chapter 16, he praises, King Josiah, for his righteousness, and justice. He praises him, to his son, mentioned here, Jehoiakim, and then Zedekiah.

So he preaches, as this great reforming king, is carrying out, a reform, which is going to be, ill-fated, which is not going to succeed. The kind of circumstance, make anyone want to run away.

[12 : 50] Anyone who's ever, stood in a pulpit, not just this one, but any pulpit, knows that. Anyone who's ever tried, to share the faith, with a friend, knows that. Anyone who has ever, presented the gospel, to anyone, knows that.

This is a task, that makes us want, to run away. But it was alright, in the reign of Josiah, but Jehoiakim, a compromiser, Zedekiah, a born loser, under whose reign, the kingdom was going, to go away to Babylon.

And here we are, facing, difficult, and dangerous times, like our own world, violence, drugs, suffering, sheer vulnerability. What's Jeremiah got, to face this?

Jeremiah has, something that seems, very weak, very feeble, very ineffective. Jeremiah has a word. And of course, if it were only the words, of Jeremiah, it would be weak, it would be ineffective. But it's not just, the words of Jeremiah, it's the word, of the Lord, the word, of the creator, the word, of the savior. Living in dangerous times, we are living in dangerous times.

[13 : 58] And what do we have? We have the same word, the same God, the same gospel, as Jeremiah. You often have heard me saying, we are not David. Well, we are not Jeremiah either.

But we have Jeremiah's God, and we have Jeremiah's gospel. So that's the first thing. Dangerous times, verses one to three. And then in verses four to sixteen, we have a divine call.

This is the main part of the chapter, the middle part of the chapter. Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

If Jeremiah is going to carry out this task, he's going to need resources greater than his own. Land of Anathoth, within sight of Jerusalem, but not quite, not quite within the city.

And this message, because it is the word of the Lord, is for our time as well. So what is the Lord saying to him? First of all, Jeremiah is called to a relationship.

[14 : 59] That's verse five. Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

The creator is at work. This word formed, it's the word used in Genesis 2, the word used when God formed man out of the dust of the ground and made him a living spirit.

If God is already calling him into a relationship before he is born, indeed, even before he was a fetus in the womb, then this is going to give enormous strength, isn't it?

This is a covenant relationship. Not just I knew about you. Not just I knew there was somebody called Jeremiah going to be born. It's I knew you in the sense that you are in my plan.

And this is developed in two words. I consecrated you. I set you apart for this task. This is not an emergency, Jeremiah. You're not being called because things have got so bad.

[16:02] I don't know what to do about them. Jeremiah, I set you apart before your birth. And I appointed you. I've given you a specific task.

And notice it's a prophet to the nations. There's nothing parochial about God. Right from the beginning, God is interested in all the nations of the world.

Right from the beginning, God loves the world. God loves humanity. And he appoints those he calls to the nations. Now, of course, you may well say, well, that's Jeremiah's call.

He was given a unique call at a unique time. And that's absolutely true. Listen to Romans 8, verse 29. Those whom he foreknew.

Same covenant word. Those whom he knew long before their birth, indeed before the worlds were made. He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son.

[16:57] That includes everyone here who belongs to the Lord. Before you were born. Before your parents were born. Before any star shone in the sky.

Before the earth and the stars were made. Those whom he foreknew. He predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. This is Jeremiah's God.

This is your God and mine as well. Jeremiah is called to relationship. Then verses 6 to 10. He is commissioned to a task. Then the Lord put it.

Verse 6. And I said, Oh, Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak. This is Jeremiah's pleasing modesty here. Jeremiah doesn't say, Oh, you made a good choice here, Lord.

I'm your man. You couldn't have chosen better. Even if you'd asked my advice, first of all. He is pleasing modesty. Lord, I am but a youth.

[17:53] Probably about 16 or 17 perhaps. I don't quite know. Certainly no more than 20. And of course there is genuine fear.

There's genuine perplexity. I called you. Lord, I'm just a boy. Interesting. Moses before said, I'm too old. Jeremiah says, I'm too young.

These are genuine fears. You notice that the Lord does not rebuke. The Lord reassures. It places the emphasis where it ought to be on the master and not on the servant.

Verse 9. The Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And then verse 7 before that. Do not say, I am only a youth. For to all whom I send you, you shall go.

That doesn't mean that Jeremiah's circumstances, that doesn't mean that Jeremiah's age doesn't matter. What it means is that what is far more important, not what age he is, not what his background is, but the fact the Lord has appointed him for that task.

[19:06] So it's not whether we, it's not what age we are, it's not what our abilities are, it's whether the Lord has put his hand on our mouth. And you'll notice verse 9.

Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. That doesn't mean that the book of Jeremiah fell from heaven in a great block, in the language of the King James Version.

That's not what it means at all. What it means is that in these circumstances, the words that Jeremiah speaks are the authentic message from God, and what a word it is.

And it also means that Jeremiah has no authority to alter these words. It means Jeremiah has no right to water them down. Jeremiah has no right to make them more palatable.

Jeremiah has no right to say things he thinks people will want to hear any more than we do. And in particular, verse 10, these words are going to be repeated several times throughout the book.

[20:08] The key elements in Jeremiah's message, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

You see, there is a negative message, to pluck up, break down, destroy and overthrow. Pluck up, of course, means basically uprooting a plant. And that's the metaphor that's used of Israel.

God took the vine and planted it in the land of Israel. Now he's tearing up that vine, breaking down, literally breaking down the city walls, breaking down the temple, breaking down the houses, to

destroy, that's what's literally going to happen, and to overthrow.

And if the message ended there, it would indeed be a Jeremiah, wouldn't it? The message has to begin there, of course. People will not repent if they think they're doing well.

People will not repent if they think God is pleased with them. God is justly angry. And therefore, the plucking, the breaking, the destroying, the overthrowing, is leading to build and to plant.

[21 : 18] You notice these two metaphors, they're similar, but not identical. To build, of course, is going to be literally fulfilled after the exile, when the people of God return. And you can read about that, Ezra and Nehemiah, building first the temple, then the walls, and the houses of the city.

And to plant. It's not just a solid building, it's a growing organism. So you see, these two words are so important. After the disaster, there is hope.

After the destruction, there is rebuilding and replanting. So he's called to relationship, he's commissioned to a task, and this is confirmed by two visions, in verses 11 to 16.

These visions confirm the message, and they shape the prophet's ministry. And they're both ordinary signs, an almond branch, and a cooking pot on an outdoor fire.

And they both illustrate, if you like, the positive and negative aspects. Anathoth, as I say, near Jerusalem, is still a center for almond growing.

[22 : 26] Look at verse 11. The word of the Lord came to me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? He said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, you have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform.

There's a word play here, which you can't really reproduce in English. The word for almond, and the word for watching, are the same root. But, it's very significant what's happening.

The almond branch, the almond shoot. This is a yearly miracle, if you like, showing that the living word is still alive, is still active.

Like what Isaiah talks about, in chapter 55. The word comes down from heaven, and so does the rain and snow, which causes growth. So, this is the, God is still at work.

Even during the exile, even during the judgment, God is still at work. His word is living, his word is growing. This is not a dead word, this is a living word. And then the boiling pot, is a symbol of judgment.

[23 : 32] They said, the north, verse 14, out of the north, disaster should be let loose. The age old, invasion root, first of the Assyrians, and then of the Babylonians.

But, notice this is still, under God's control. Verse 15, Behold, I am calling, all the tribes, of the kingdoms, of the north. This is what the prophets continually say, like at the beginning of Daniel, when we are told, that the Lord, delivered Jehoiakim, mentioned here, into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. The exile, was not a ghastly accident. The exile, was not, something unpredicted. This was God's judgment, for sinfulness, for evil.

We see more of that, in the succeeding chapters, in order that he might shape, a new covenant, a new covenant, which was the covenant, of the, of the living word.

And verse, and verse, um, 15, is going to be, literally fulfilled. In chapter 39, when the Babylonians, break down, the city walls, they very literally, set up, the commanders, set up their thrones, in the center, of the city.

[24 : 42] So, this is going to be fulfilled. So, you see what, what the Lord is saying, year after year, Jeremiah, as you see, the Ammon branch, year after year, whatever appears, to be happening, I am watching, over my word.

My word is living. And you will see, the judgment come. And why will the judgment come? Verse 16, I will declare my judgments, for all their evil, in forsaking me.

They have made offerings, to other gods, and worship the work, of their own hands. And that's going to be developed, in the following chapters. Just one other thing, about the two visions, and the contrast.

The Ammon shoot happens, year after year, after year. This judgment, is going to be terrible. It's going to be, it's going to be something, that no one can, no one can evade.

And yet, it's if you like, it's a once off. And it can be avoided, if people turn from idolatry. They are evil, they have made offerings, to other gods, and worship the work, of their own hands.

[25 : 57] And this is one, of the many places, where the prophets, show the absolute silliness, of idolatry. Idolatry is so foolish, not simply, because people, make something, that is lesser than God.

People make something, that's lesser than themselves. Something that is less, than human. And fall down, and worship it. Read Isaiah 40, and follow you, and see how Isaiah, mocks this silliness, of idolatry.

The next time, we're going to see, in chapter 2, they've committed, two evils. They've forsaken me, the fountain, of living waters, and have hewed out, cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold, no water.

Idolatry, is not just evil, it is utterly silly, that the prophets, keep on saying. Poor Jeremiah, has to go, to this proud, complacent nation, and tell them, this devastating truth, about themselves.

You know, that's still the message, as we take the gospel. The gospel is bad news, first of all. The bad news, is you're not good enough, I'm not good enough, we'll never make it, on our own.

[27 : 01] We are sinful, we are lost, and we're never going, to make it, because God, is going to judge us. But the good news, is that God, has provided a savior.

Someone, someone, who will take away, the sin, and fill us, with a spirit, if we repent. So that's why, we need a savior, who is not us.

We can't save ourselves. We also need a savior, who is us. I don't mean us, as individuals, I mean someone, who is also, a true human being, truly God, and truly man.

And God, has provided, that savior, amazing grace. Jeremiah, is a prophet, of grace, because, judgment is preached, in order that, grace will come.

So you see, this divine call, is something unique, to Jeremiah. And yet, the essence, of that call, is what every Christian, is called to share, with the world.

[28 : 01] The bad news, God, will destroy, because of idolatry, because of evil. And the good news, God has provided, a way, of salvation. So in these, dangerous times, Jeremiah, Jeremiah receives, the divine call, and finally, in verses 7 to 19, he receives, divine protection.

But you, notice verse 17, Jeremiah, don't, succumb, to the idolatry, of the people, around you.

Don't, become, yourself, complacent, deeply, personal, and uncompromising.

And the Lord, says two things, don't hide, the truth. But you, dress yourself, for work, arise, and say to them, everything, that I command you.

That word, everything, is important. It must be, the complete, gospel message. Not snippets, which are, calculated, to please people. Go, and tell them, don't water this down, to gain, a little cheap, popularity, Jeremiah.

If you read on, in Jeremiah, you'll find, he most certainly, does not do that. Don't hide, the truth. And don't hide, the truth, because it's only, the truth, that can change people.

[29 : 17] If you keep on, telling people, if you keep on, telling them, that they're, good enough, they're going to be, they're going to be judged. One thing we discover, is go through Jeremiah, more than 200 times, the word prophet, is mentioned, and it's nearly, always, false prophets, who are mentioned.

There were, Jerusalem was, full of people, saying, God will never judge, the city. God is love, God is grace, God will never judge. Absolutely, full of that, just as our own day is.

So, don't hide, the truth. And secondly, don't be afraid. Now, God is not saying, to Jeremiah, don't feel afraid.

God is saying, to Jeremiah, the whole establishment, is arrayed against you. Look at verse 18. Kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, the whole of the establishment, want to do you down, Jeremiah.

But also, popular opposition, the people, of the land. Now, that's, that's a pretty, formidable task, isn't it? Jeremiah is an isolated figure, although God, graciously, gave him, his secretary, Baruch, who, we read about later on, who, was probably the one, who collected the prophecies, and, and put them together.

[30 : 39] But in any case, Jeremiah has got the whole, of the establishment, against him. The whole of popular opinion, against him. Of course, God doesn't say, oh, don't feel afraid, it won't be too bad.

God says, in fact, it's just as bad, as you think it is. They won't listen. They don't want you. They don't want your words. But, I make you this day, a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls.

In other words, the Lord is going to give Jeremiah, his own strength, a fortress, the word used about the Lord himself. Jeremiah, I'm going to be with you.

And then, and a very important, verse 19, they will fight against you. Of course they will, but they will not prevail against you. For I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.

To deliver, that's the word used of the Exodus story. After all, God is reminding Jeremiah, I'm the God of Moses. I'm the God who protected my people and still protects them.

[31 : 42] Now, so often, God doesn't say, oh, there's not going to be a fight, Jeremiah. So often, God doesn't stop the fight. He stands with the fighter. And that's what he's going to do here. Rather, rather like those verses in Revelation, chapter 14, they will make war.

That's all the, you know, that's all God's enemies. They will make war against the Lamb and they will not overcome them. And with the Lamb are the chosen, the called, and the faithful, those whom he knew and predestined to be conformed to the image of his son.

Jeremiah's words appear to fail at the time. If somebody wanted to write the biography of Jeremiah at the time, it wouldn't be a success story, would it?

And yet, those words which appear to fail at the time were carried out to the letter and we, thousands of years later, are listening to these same words today.

Jeremiah, I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. And of course, Jeremiah's words are still with us. Heaven and earth will pass away, said the Lord, but my words shall not pass away.

[33 : 00] And those words, part of those words were given to Jeremiah. We have Jeremiah's God. We have Jeremiah's gospel. And the Lord is with us to deliver us.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Let's pray. Our Father, how easy it is to panic, to panic when we see the kings, the officials, the priests, and the people of the land.

How easy it is to keep our head down. How simple it is to run away. Help us to be strengthened by this great promise. I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.

And help us in our day to be faithful as your servant Jeremiah was in his. And we ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.