

Powerful words for perilous times

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Date: 02 December 2012

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[0 : 00] Now, readings on the sheet here. We're going to read some extracts from two long chapters of Jeremiah, chapters 5 and 6.

The young prophet has been called to deliver a message of judgment to the people of his day. He's warned them, particularly of an enemy from the north, the Babylonians, who are coming to destroy them.

And these chapters, once again, repeat that. But they've got some new material in them as well. And it's particularly that we're going to read this evening. So we read from Jeremiah 5, verse 10, first of all.

Go up through her vine rows and destroy, but make not a full end. Strip away her branches, for they are not the Lord's, for the house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly treacherous to me, declares the Lord.

They have spoken falsely of the Lord and have said, He will do nothing. No disaster will come upon us, nor shall we see sword or famine. The prophets will become wind.

[1 : 11] The word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, because you have spoken this word, behold, I'm making my words in your mouth a fire.

And this people would, and the fire shall consume them. Behold, I'm bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares the Lord. It is an enduring nation.

It is an ancient nation. A nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb. They are almighty warriors.

They shall eat up your harvest and your food. They shall eat up your sons and your daughters.

They shall eat up your flocks and your herds. They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees.

Your fortified cities in which you trust, they shall beat down with the sword. But even in those days, declares the Lord, I will not make a full end of you.

[2 : 09] And when your people say, why has the Lord our God done all these things to us? You shall say to them, as you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so shall you serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.

Declare this in the house of Jacob. Proclaim it in Judah. Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but see not, who have ears but hear not.

Do you not fear me, declares the Lord? Do you not tremble before me? I place the sand as the boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass.

Though the waves toss, they cannot prevail. An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely and the priests rule up their direction.

My people love to have it so. But what will you do when the end comes? Thus says the Lord of hosts. They shall glean thoroughly as a vine the remnant of Israel, like a great gatherer, pass your hand again over its branches.

[3 : 16] To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised. They cannot listen. Behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn.

They take no pleasure in it. For I am full of the wrath of the Lord. Indeed, I am weary of holding it in. Pour it out upon the children in the street and upon the gatherings of young men also.

Both husband and wife shall be taken. The elderly and the very aged. Their houses shall be turned over to others. Their fields and wives together. For I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land, declares the Lord.

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain. And from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, peace,

peace.

When there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed. They did not know how to blush. Therefore, they shall fall among those who fall. [4 : 20] At that time I punish them. They shall be overthrown, says the Lord. Thus says the Lord, stand by the roads and look. And ask for the ancient paths where the good way is and walk in it and find rest for your souls.

But they said, we will not walk in it. I set watchmen over you, saying, pay attention to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, we will not pay attention. Therefore, hear, O nations, and know, O congregation, what will happen to them.

Hear, O earth, I am bringing disaster upon these people, the fruit of their devices. Because they have not paid attention to my words. And that's all my law.

They have rejected it. What use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba? Or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable.

Nor your sacrifice is pleasing to me. Therefore, thus says the Lord. Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks. Against which they shall stumble. Fathers and sons together.

[5 : 25] Your neighbor and friend shall perish. I have made you, says the Lord to Jeremiah, a tester of metals among my people, that you may know and test their ways.

They are all stubbornly rebellious, going about with slanders. They are bronze and iron. All of them act corruptly. The bellows blow fiercely. The lead is consumed by the fire.

In vain the refining goes on. For the wicked are not removed. Rejected silver they are called. For the Lord has rejected them.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. And may he bless it to our hearts. Now let's have a moment of prayer before we look together at Jeremiah.

Lift every voice with adoration. Children of God. By grace alone. As you are children, by grace alone.

[6 : 45] We know you have words to say to us. Words that we need to hear. And we pray that these written words will be unfolded faithfully. Through my imperfect human words.

That they will lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus. In whose name we pray. Amen. Words are really fragile things, aren't they?

If you are going to fight a battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, words seem pretty ineffective. And of course, there is something in some of the sayings we use that give credence to that.

Talk is cheap, we say. Actions speak louder than words. So and so is all mouth and all talk. And then think of the power of words.

Think how Churchill fought the Second World War with words. During a period when he had nothing else to fight it with. If you go down to the Churchill Museum in London, you can hear that great gravelly voice summoning the nation back from its knees.

[8 : 00] Calling them to fight on the beaches and on the landing grounds. Nowadays, Jeremy Paxson would have been asking him which beach and which landing ground and so on. It's a great tragedy in our national life that oratory has become so despised.

But even lesser men than Churchill, sometimes a speech can turn the fortunes of a political party. Something that's said can fill you with joy and with hope.

And if these words are the words of the living God, then they do far more than that. These are words that can change. These are words that can transform.

And these are words that if they're rejected or neglected, can destroy. And the main theme, I think, of these sections that we read from Jeremiah is the power of the words that God gives to Jeremiah. Think of the situation Jeremiah is in. This young prophet is facing the unbridled and unmitigated hostility of the whole establishment, political, religious, social.

[9 : 05] He also realizes the enemy from the north, the Babylonians, are shortly to come. And the words that Jeremiah is given are contrasted here, as they often are later in the book, with the lying words of the false prophets.

So I have called this powerful words for perilous times. Because this at heart is what the gospel is about. But as Willie was pointing out this morning, there will always be other voices.

Other voices calling to an easy and cheap gospel. Voices calling us away from reality to fantasy. Voices calling us away from the living God to dead idols.

Now, I want us to look at these sections under three headings, which contrast the living words of God spoken by Jeremiah with the dead words of the false prophets.

The first thing is, the living word devours the dross. That's really 5, 10 to 18. And then the next section, 30 and 31.

[10:17] Jeremiah had been called by God in chapter 1. And God said, say to them everything I command you. Do not be dismayed by them.

Anyone who shares the gospel, whether it's from a pulpit, or whether it's in a small group, or one to one, is continually facing the temptation to water it down.

To say what people would like to hear. To speak smooth and pleasant words. And for Jeremiah, the temptation must have been all but overwhelming.

He's a young man. He's facing, as I say, this hostile establishment. He's surrounded by prophets who are telling lies. So, look at verses 10.

Go up through the vine rows and destroy. Now, this metaphor of the vine is used, of course, of the nation of Israel. In Psalm 81, the psalmist talks about the vine that God took out of Egypt and planted in the promised land.

[11:23] That metaphor is also used by Isaiah. In chapter 5 of his prophecy, Isaiah says, This vine had gone rotten.

Branches needed to be lopped off. And, of course, as you know, the Lord Jesus Christ says, I am the true vine. Israel had failed. God's son, Israel, had failed.

The true son of God, Jesus, is the true vine. And he says, stay in me. Remain in me. Otherwise, you'll be lopped off. You see, what's Jeremiah saying here?

Jeremiah is saying the people of God are a living organism. And, therefore, only the living word can nourish that organism. You don't build up people by platitudes, by theories, by anything other than the living word.

That's why it is so important. But that same word lops off the rotten branches. You see, the same word which creates, destroys, the same word which calls the repentance and faith, also condemns when that call is rejected.

[12:38] Ultimately, this is the test. How do we respond to the living word of God? Not do we get it right all the time. Not are we perfect.

But are we a living branch who is nourished by that word? Are we in danger of becoming a dead branch that's lopped off? And that metaphor really continues more powerfully in verse 14.

Behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire. And this people would, and the fire shall consume them. The word devours dross. You see, since fire is the regular metaphor used of God himself, to reject the word of God is to reject God.

As the theologian Jim Packer says, what the Bible says, God says. And the metaphor is carried on in verse 17. They shall eat up your harvest and your food, sons and daughters and so on.

Now, of course, it is the Babylonians who are going to do this. But it is the Lord who is bringing the Babylonians to devour the rotten branches, so to speak, to eat them up, to burn them with fire.

[13:52] Rather like what the prophet Amos says, I will send a fire into these cities. And the fire, of course, is the judgment of God. Amos, in the earlier generation, is meaning the Assyrians.

Here, Jeremiah is meaning the Babylonians. Why is God doing this? He is going to punish his people who have rejected him.

The letter to the Hebrews says, the word of God is living and active, piercing to the joints and the marrow. You see, words, when they are God's words, are powerful words.

They are not just hot air. They are not just wind. And this is what Jeremiah is told to preach that word. It will burn like fire. It will hurt. But it will heal if it's accepted.

And it won't. And it will only destroy if the people are not willing to hear it. Verse 18, even in those days, declares the Lord, I will not make a full end of you.

[14:55] There will be a remnant who will listen. There is always a remnant who listens. But by contrast to that, there are false words which lead to judgment.

Look at verse 12. They have spoken falsely of the Lord and have said, he will do nothing. The God of Israel, the God who created the heavens and the earth, the Lord who brought his people out of Egypt, the mighty hand, is reduced here to an unconcerned bystander.

He will do nothing. No disaster, no evil will come upon us. You see, these are words which people like to hear. The tragedy is, of course, these words are bringing judgment.

The prophets will become wind. That's not the wind of the spirit. That is empty wind. That's just simply speaking empty words. That was true in Jeremiah's day and it is still true today. We are reaping the harvest of 150 years of liberal theology and unbelief. First of all in theological colleges and universities. Then in their products.

[16:06] So I'm preaching that from the pulpits. What's that done? Has it created a people who are enthusiastic about the gospel in love with the Lord Jesus Christ?

Of course it hasn't. It has emptied the churches and made the word of God a scorn and a contempt. Priest and prophet here are paying lip service.

How do you recognize a false teacher? The one thing a false teacher will never do is tell people they need to change. A false teacher will be forever affirming, forever saying everything is wonderful, everything is alright.

They will never preach judgment. And that's why. That's why in verse 21.

Hear this, O foolish and senseless people who have eyes, but see not. And then in verse 31. What will you do when the end comes?

[17:17] Now, so often in the prophets, the end has a near and a far horizon. The near horizon is the Babylonian invasion that's going to happen. When the Babylonian armies are surrounding Jerusalem.

When their siege ramps are run up against the walls. When they burst through the gates. When they burn the temple. When they treat you all with savage cruelty.

What will you say then? There's of course a further end. Because that points to the last day. You see, this is the test. Not public opinion. Not popular preference.

But what will you do when the end comes? Will this stand the day of judgment? Will what they say stand the fire of judgment?

Because the one thing that links together all that liberal and unbelieving theology is this. They do not believe in judgment. They do not believe that God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness.

[18:18] By the man whom he has appointed and raised from the dead. So you see, the word burns up dross. It did it then. And it will always do it.

Right to the very end. Secondly, the word calls for radical change. Let's read verses 9 to 15 of chapter 6. Because the word burns dross.

Because the word preaches of judgment. Then drastic action is needed. And once again, the metaphor of the vine.

They shall green thoroughly as a vine. And so on. And the first thing, of course, is people actually have to listen.

Verse 10. To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised. They cannot listen. What does it mean to listen?

[19:19] Listen doesn't just mean being present when the words are spoken. Anyone who is currently or who in the past has brought up children knows that very well. Do you hear what I said?

Yes. And of course, all it means is that they were there when the words were spoken. That's what's happening to God's people. Now, of course, with our kids, it's often just carelessness, isn't it?

But here, it is deliberate ignoring. The vivid metaphor. Verse 10. Behold, their ears are uncircumcised. Now, circumcision was the sign of the covenant.

But the point that's made right from the beginning, right from Moses himself, is that the important thing was that circumcision was a matter of the heart. The outward sign of the covenant mattered nothing if the heart was unwilling and stubborn and unwilling to listen.

And here the suggestion is that the ears are totally insensitive. They cannot listen. Why can they not listen? Because they have been stubborn and rebellious for so long that when they hear the living word, they're not capable of understanding it.

[20:34] They're not capable of responding to it. This means that the whole of society, a comprehensive judgment of the whole of society.

Verse 11. Children, young men, husband and wife, the elderly and the aged, houses, fields, wives, for I will stretch out my hand. Everyone, he says, deals falsely.

From the least to the greatest. In verse 13. Everyone is greedy for unjust gain. And from prophet to priest, saying everyone deals falsely.

How do we respond to the living word of God? It's a question that faces us all. It's very easy to respond to it superficially, isn't it?

Even to like it. To enjoy it. Even to say that was a good sermon. But is it actually shaping our attitudes and our hearts? Because that is the contrast.

[21 : 36] The word calls for a radical change. And verses 13 and 14 tell us about the futility of superficial change. From the prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.

They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying peace, peace, when there is no peace. Remedies were needed for a deadly disease.

But these leaders were healing lightly. A very vivid phrase. Like giving an aspirin for cancer. They were talking about superficial remedies.

New ways of doing church. New initiatives to get people to come in. Get rid of a thriving congregation and plant another one. That sort of thing.

The institution is dying. So we'll profit up. That's healing the wounds of my people lightly. Surely. They will not do the one thing that's needed.

[22 : 40] Turn in repentance to the Lord. And unleash his word. You see, on the one hand, we have got the word that calls for radical change.

On the other, we've got the word that says, everything is just fine. Just keep on doing what you're doing. Everything will be all right. The third thing I want to say, and that begins in verse 16.

The word is eternally true. Thus says the Lord, stand by the roads and look. And ask for the ancient paths where the good way is and walk in it and find rest for your souls.

So what is the word that Jeremiah is called to preach? And this can easily be misunderstood. I want to comment on this word ancient.

Is Jeremiah being called to preach traditionalism? Let's turn to a golden past when Scotland was Christian. Or a golden past when Israel believed the Lord and so on.

[23 : 50] A Christian Scotland where a national church brings the ordinances of religion to every part of the land without a square inch being missed out.

Is that what ancient means? It doesn't mean that at all. The word translated ancient here would be far better translated everlasting. It's the Hebrew word *olam*, which you get in Psalm 90.

From everlasting to everlasting. From *olam* to *olam*. You are God. It's the word that David uses in Psalm 139. Lead me in the way everlasting.

You see, that gives quite a different slant on the word. Ancient. Let's go back to the old traditions. Let's do what we always did. Let's go back to some mythical time in the past, whether the 1950s or the 1630s or whenever it was.

That's not what Jeremiah is saying. Jeremiah is saying, ask for the everlasting paths. And why is it everlasting? This is the Torah given through Moses.

[25 : 01] The eternal words of God, which are eternally relevant. So it's not traditionalism. It's radicalism that Jeremiah is saying. Be radical. Where the good way is.

The limit echo, I think, of the creation story. God saw and it was good. And good in the Old Testament is not just a vague word. We use the word all the time.

Good is just nice. It's just a fairly vague and meaningless word. In the Bible, the word good means something or someone which is fulfilling the purpose for which God created it.

Walk in the paths that Moses taught you to walk in. Walk in the paths laid down in his word. And that will lead to rest.

Obviously, it will lead to rest in the sense of freedom from fear. But also, ultimately, eternal rest.

[26 : 01] That passage in Hebrews I mentioned about the word of God being quick and powerful is the passage that talks about the rest that remains for the people of God. So what do we need today?

We need a radical unleashing of that word, which is eternal. It is ancient. Of course, it was spoken long ago. But because it's eternal, it's as applicable now as it was then.

That is the point. It's not about institutions as we'll see in a moment. It's not about buildings. It's about the living word of God. And Jeremiah is going to develop that.

And we'll look at this next week in the famous temple sermon in chapter 7. Stand by the roads and look. Ask for the ways that are eternal and therefore will lead you into God's future, God's eternal future.

Surely there are other voices speaking here as well. Verse 20. What use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba or sweet cane from a distant land.

[27 : 10] Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifice is pleasing to me. This is one of the many places where the prophets condemn the God-given institutions, not because the institutions of themselves are wrong, but because the hearts of the people are wrong.

The people are wrong. Isaiah says this. Amos says this. And at the very end of the Old Testament, be it in Malachi as well, you're bringing diseased offerings.

The priests are not teaching the words of Moses. See what the prophet is saying. Even God-given ways, if they are done in a godless manner, become blasphemous without an obedient heart. Remember the prophet Micah mentioned him before. What does the Lord your God require of you? Does he require burnt offerings, rivers of blood? No, he requires you to love justice and walk humbly with your God.

And it's dangerous and even deadly if we make idols of even God-given things. Of course, we need to do these things that God has commended us to do.

[28 : 36] Honest, hard work at Bible teaching, a right kind of professionalism in all that we do. Whatever you do, says Paul, do it heartily as to the Lord.

But once we begin to become proud of these things, once we begin to judge ourselves and others on the number of meetings we attend, the number of activities we engage in, then we've ceased to believe in grace.

Do these things. It's right to do these things. But don't trust in them. Don't rely on them. Don't go around telling other people how many of them you do. That is a denial of grace.

We need them. What do we need? We don't need institutions. Of course, there has to be a certain amount of organization. You can't... And those who try to avoid that usually just end up in a kind of tyranny or a kind of anarchy, often both at the same time.

But these are only in order that other things can be done. Some of us read recently the book *The Trellis and the Vine*. We've talked about how so much church work is on the trellis.

[29 : 46] In other words, the institution, the meetings and so on, rather than on nurturing the vine. We need the trellis. But only so that the vine can flourish. And of course, we do have in our own hands what Jeremiah had as well.

We have the Word of God preached here for many, many decades. The Word of God will, wherever it is preached, will remain powerful.

It will change lives. It will change us as we submit to it. And it will change the lives of others as we reach out to them. The Word, the powerful words for perilous times spoken by the prophet.

Living words which change lives. Living words which call that a remnant from among the godless people. Living words which were pointing powerfully to the future when the remnant would return. And beyond that, of course, to the day when Christ himself will return. I want to finish with some powerful words of C.H. Spurgeon. This is from a sermon he preached on Revelation 7.

[30 : 58] A sermon on that great passage which points to the future wonder of the people of God gathered round the throne. Spurgeon said this, The gospel will succeed.

The gospel must succeed. It cannot be prevented from succeeding. A multitude that no one can number will be saved.

We have been given the powerful words. Let's preach them and live them in these perilous times. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we praise you for these words of Jeremiah.

Not just to your ancient people, but to your people of today. And indeed to your people all the time in the future. Help us indeed to seek the everlasting paths where the good way is.

And walk in them and find rest for our souls. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.