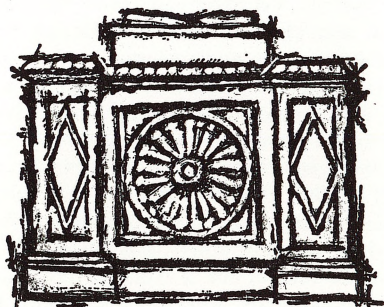


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"Remembering Who We Are:
Jeremiah"

A Sermon by

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Scripture Reference: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Thomas Jefferson was right, I believe, in declaring that "all men are created equal." In terms of our worth in the sight of God, every one of us stands on the very same level. But this sort of equality must not be confused with "just-alikeness," for in terms of temperament and gifts and the opportunities we have in history, there are vast differences between individual persons.

No better illustration of this fact could be found anywhere than in comparing two of our spiritual kinsmen out of the Old Testament; namely, last week's ancestor, the man Isaiah, and today's kinsman, the prophet Jeremiah. The books bearing their names appear back to back in the Holy Scripture, but between them is not only a space of some one hundred years of history, but also a vast chasm of temperament and life experience. Last week I tried to depict Isaiah for what he was—a princely and aristocratic sort of man who always seemed to act out of a stance of positive strength. He was well-born, utterly secure, and thus could speak

frankly and fearlessly to kings and common people alike. There was an air of assurance and authority that characterized everything which Isaiah did.

However, the prophet Jeremiah comes through as an entirely different sort of man, for from start to finish his life was torn with inner strife and uncertainty and ambiguity. If Isaiah's experience could be likened to an escalator, which rises steadily and progressively higher, Jeremiah's experience could be compared to a roller-coaster, which is forever up and down. Nowhere in Scripture do we witness quite the fluctuation of feeling that is found in this book. Perhaps part of the reason for this is that we know more of Jeremiah's inner moods than we do of others. His books represents a new form of prophetic record, for it contains not only his words to the people but also his inner dialogues with God. However, significant as this factor may be, it cannot be used to explain the whole difference. We might as well face it—Jeremiah's life was a battlefield of emotional conflict. He was capable of having his feelings soar in ecstasy as he delighted in God, but he also knew times of horrible depression when he accused God of being unreliable and cursed the day he was born and the man and the woman who had brought him into the world. He also could be unbelievably compassionate with other people, manifesting a tenderness of feeling that is rare indeed. Yet at other times he was just as extreme in his hostility and vindicativeness toward those who failed him or hurt him. Jeremiah was not a plaster saint who was always strong and good, and for that very reason, I for one want to know more about him. For, to be honest, I feel closer to this "up-and-downer" than I do to the aristocrat. My emotional life is more roller coaster than escalator. My hour to hour experience has more struggle in it than the effortless unfolding of height upon height. And I rather imagine that most of you join me in this identification. There just are not many Isaiahs around in any age. But our brother Jeremiah, who found life difficult every inch of the way—here is someone we can feel close to and hopefully one from whom we can learn.

The first thing I want us to do is to use "a zoom lense" on Jeremiah's experience; that is, move in closely and ask why his life was so conflictual and filled with such emotional extremes. When we do this, I think we will find that there were two reasons for his conflicts.

One of these has to be the self-concept which Jeremiah had developed and out of which he proceeded to live his life. Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah tended to be negative at this point. In the first glimpse we get of him in the book—the moment of his call—this sort of tendency is evident. God declared that before the foundations of the earth, He had meant for

Jeremiah to be His spokesman in that era. Before he was formed in the womb or born into history, he had been consecrated for that purpose, but Jeremiah could not accept such a destiny. The image he had of himself was much less than this, so he immediately demurred by saying: "I can't do that. I do not know how to speak. I'm just a child, a weakling, a worthless nothing." From the very beginning, Jeremiah thought less of himself than he ought to have thought, and this inferiority complex, this sense of inadequacy, plagued him all through his life. He was never able to shake this image of self-despising completely, although God struggled with him patiently all through his days, and this has to be part of the explanation of why Jeremiah had such a hard time in his life. Isaiah was more fortunate here. We saw last week how he volunteered at the moment of his call, and seemed to know how to claim the promise of his inheritance from the heavenly Father. But Jeremiah was not able to do this so assuredly, which is one reason why the lives of these two turned out to be so different.

From the evidence we have before us, it is impossible to pinpoint absolutely where this negative self-concept originated, but undoubtedly it began at home and was rooted in the way Jeremiah was treated in his earliest days. He came from a priestly family who lived in a village northeast of Jerusalem, and we do know that later in his life some of his family turned against him and even joined in a plot to assassinate him. It could have been that his earliest childhood experiences at home were negative ones, so that from the beginning Jeremiah thought of himself as incapable of any task. Dr. Hiram Ginnott has written extensively about the relations between parents and children, and he says there is nothing more damaging to a child's self-concept than sweeping statements like: "You are lazy, or sloppy, or dumb, or bad." When a child hears this sort of thing, it is a literal broadside to his whole personhood, and he may conclude that he is totally worthless and thus can do nothing in order to change. Dr. Ginnott strongly urges that parents relate positively to their children on the level of being, and confine their negative transactions to the doing level. For example, a parent can and ought to say to his child in relation to some specific act: "Look, you are doing this sloppily" or "You are acting dishonestly and this bothers me." We can thus pinpoint the problem specifically without implying that this represents the totality of the child's personhood. In this way, the power to change and adapt behavior is preserved in a way it can never be when one hears that he *is* this or that or the other. It is the same principle as the famous formula for "loving the sinner but hating the sin." To affirm a person at the being level and at the same time modify behavior at the doing level is the ideal model of relationship, but very possibly this is not the way Jeremiah was treated as a little child, and one rea-

son why we see him as a young man shrinking back fearfully from the challenge of God's call.

However, to put all the blame on Jeremiah's parents for what they did and did not do would not be fair, for this spirit of self-despising is deeper and wider than the influence of the two people who birth and raise us. It is a disease that seems to go all the way back to the beginning; it is what the theologians call "original sin." For reasons too deep and too old for any of us to understand, we all seem to come into this world tainted with negative feelings about ourselves, and this has always been the ultimate battleground of God's grace. Dr. Thomas Harris says that no matter how ideal the parent-child relation, everyone still enters adolescence with abundant "I'm not O.K." feelings, and this is where the work of God must take place—at that deepest level of where we fashion images of ourselves. What God is pictured as doing with Jeremiah in the outset of the book is therefore what He has to do with each of us; namely, set the images He has of us alongside the images we have developed of ourselves across the years. When Jeremiah heard the story of how he came to be and what he was meant to become from God's perspective, it was so different from the record he had been playing to himself about himself that he could not believe it. But this is what the story of Jeremiah is all about—how God struggled to change the record that played inside Jeremiah—how He mercifully and patiently retold Jeremiah's story to him until finally he became re-educated emotionally and learned to accept what God loved—his real self. Such a process is always slow and painful, which is why Jeremiah was up and down so often, but I repeat: this is the basic work of grace. This is where our ultimate struggle with God goes on—not just in terms of what we believe about Him, but in terms of what He believes about us. Coming to accept and affirm this is no easy task for chronic, life-long self-haters like Jeremiah, or you, or me, but to use a modern phrase, "this is where it's at" spiritually, and one reason why Jeremiah's life was such a struggle. In terms of self-concept, he and God started out worlds apart, and it took a lot of doing finally to get them together.

The other reason for Jeremiah's agony has to be the particular time in which he was called to live. We need to remember that nations, just like persons, can get sick and decay and finally die, and Jeremiah happened to be born in the era when Israel as a nation was terminally ill. His ministry can be dated from 626 B.C. until 587 B.C. when the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and captured the King, which meant that David's throne was vacated forever. It was a horrible period for any son of Abraham to have to live through, and the problem was that Jeremiah saw what was coming before most other

people did and advocated a stance of realistic acceptance. Such perception was ahead of its time and "against the grain," and almost everybody wound up hating Jeremiah for the position he took. As in many cases of terminal illness, a great sense of unreality pervaded Jerusalem. These people had not been true to the covenant of Yahweh. They had not done justly and loved mercy or walked humbly with their God, and therefore there was little cohesive community among them. The rampant injustices of court and marketplace had so polarized the society that nothing could unite and inspire them. Yet they persisted in their notions of innocence and special Divine favor. They thought Jerusalem would be saved, no matter what, and when Jeremiah stated plainly that it could not be, they attacked him rather than their real problems. Of course, this is a very ancient practice—to blame the bearer of bad tidings for the news he brings. Centuries ago the Greeks used to kill the messenger who brought bad news, as if what had happened were his fault, and today we do the same thing by getting mad at the newspapers and television as if they created the problems they report. This very thing happened to Jeremiah. God knows he had tried to warn the people and get them to rend their hearts and not their garments, but they had been heedless. Thus, when the consequences finally arrived and it was clear that Judah was sick unto death and would be conquered, by simply acknowledging this fact, Jeremiah was abused and beaten and humiliated by the whole establishment of Jerusalem, as if attacking the diagnostician would be some kind of cure for their cancer.

What I am saying is that part of the agony that characterized Jeremiah's life can be attributed to the awful sickness of that moment of history—which underlines the fact that there are some eras when it is not very pleasant to serve God. It is by no means *always* a popular and affirming task. Once again, this very note was present in Jeremiah's call. He was to be God's mouthpiece, "to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." This means comforting and affirming are not the only forms the work of God can assume, and we sometimes forget this as we evaluate religious leaders. Even today, when certain men of God disturb us and point out things about us we do not like to face, we can very easily seek to discredit them and accuse them of being traitors, as many did to Jeremiah, and seek out those preachers who will tell us what we want to hear. This has been so evident in our own time in relation to civil rights and the Vietnam war. There are true spokesmen of God who have learned just how unromantic religious service can be, for it is easier to attack the bearer of bad news than to attack the causes of that bad news. It is to Jeremiah's credit, however, that he kept on keeping on. As deeply as it wounded his spirit, and as distasteful as he found having to be a man of strife, he was faithful to the Word of God that

was often controversial precisely because it was so painfully true.

My conclusion, then, is that Jeremiah's roller-coaster life was partly due to his own sickness and partly due to the sickness of his times. No man can live peacefully through any era who thoroughly despises himself. At the same time, no man of God, even Isaiah, could have lived through the disintegration of Jerusalem without experiencing agony. Before Jeremiah's weeping eyes, his beloved nation came to a tragic end — its citizens deported — never to have a king again. But this is not where things ended for Jeremiah. For out of his own pain and the agony of his country, a magnificent hope was born, not for that day but for what would someday emerge out of these tragic conditions.

Perhaps this hope was first born within Jeremiah's own heart, as he sensed what the love of God could do in changing his self-image from despising to accepting. At any rate, as the nation was collapsing, Jeremiah was moved to do three things that set light on the other side of the darkness.

One was to go to the potter's house, as we talked about in the children's sermon, and see the potter patiently shape and then remake the same clay until at last he had a vessel as he wanted it. "So is Yahweh to Israel," proclaimed Jeremiah. "We are in His hands, just like clay in the hands of the potter, and those hands are hands of mercy. He will surely crush us in judgment—for we have been marred and unwilling material, but after that judgment—there is still hope." Just as Hosea put Gomer back on the wheel of his shaping love, so Israel would not be discarded—she was still the beloved of God.

The second sacrament of hope was buying a field in the village of Anathoth just as the Babylonians were about to overrun the country. Jeremiah was a bachelor and had no need of a farm. And besides, what good would the title to a piece of land in Palestine do if you were an exile in Babylon? Yet, Jeremiah saw beyond the deportation to a return, and bought the field as an act of faith that "houses and lands would be bought and sold there again," as they were forty years later. It was a way of saying that Israel's sickness was serious but not fatal, for the God who had once brought her out of captivity and into this land would out of His great mercy do it all over again.

The final and greatest act of Jeremiah's hope was the vision of the new covenant that he foresaw God would some day fulfill:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenants which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out

of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (31:31-34).

What you have here is the ultimate goal of Biblical religion; that is, an internalizing of God's purposes so that they become man's desire and joy. I once heard Dr. Wayne Oates use the children's story of Pinocchio to illustrate this process. As you may remember, Pinocchio was a wooden doll who became a person, only at first he did not have a developed conscience. Little Jiminy Cricket tried to function in that role, telling Pinocchio what to do and not to do, the only problem being Pinocchio would get away from him and into trouble. "If I could only get inside of him," Jiminy Cricket would say, "then I could be with him all the time and help him." Dr. Oates pointed out that this is the goal of personal maturing—when concepts of right or wrong, which are at first external to us through our parents and society, become internalized so that one wants to do what is right on his own.

Nothing short of this kind of relationship is what God desires for each one of us, and Jeremiah lifts the hope that this dream will someday come true. At last the war will be over and the rebellion ended, and we shall see God for what He is and come to love Him not because we have to or are forced to, but because we want to—because our hearts flow out to Him in rightful affection. This is the victory God's merciful persistence is striving to win—that we shall finally love Him with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength, freely and joyfully, and that remains the greatest eschatological hope of all.

In his autobiographical novel, *Report to Creco*, Nikos Kazantzakis tells of an earnest young man who visited a saintly old monk on a remote island and asked him, "Do you still wrestle with the devil, Father?" The old man answered, "Not any longer, my child. I have grown old, and he has grown old with me. He no longer has the strength . . . now I wrestle with God." "With God!" exclaimed the young man wide-eyed. "Do you hope to win?" "Oh, no, my son," came the answer, "I hope to lose."

I submit that this kind of losing is precisely what Jeremiah's new covenant was all about. It is getting to the place finally where we realize that God is good and He can be trusted and that we enter the joy above all joy when we say from the heart, "Thy will be done."

It is on this note—this hopeful note—that the troubled life of Jeremiah comes to an end. May God grant out of our ups and downs the same hopeful vision—the hope of losing to God, that we may in so doing win eternal joy.

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