

Jeremiah: On the Wheel

VISION

God might have said it this way: “Hey Jeremiah, here’s something I want you to know. Life is difficult! But there’s something I want you to do that might just make it a bit more difficult still. I want you to speak to my people, the people I love and cherish with every fibre of my being.

I want you to speak to them and tell them again that I love them. I want you to tell them that they are loved beyond their imagining with a love that makes them beautiful. But I want you to tell them too, that my heart is broken over them. I want you to tell them that my heart is broken because still, they will not listen to me. I want you to tell them I know the best way for them to live and I want them to live the best way. I want you to tell them that I want them to live the best way, precisely because I love them and I want the best for them.

I want you to tell them that they must change if they want the best. I want you to tell them must change if they want to fully know my love for them. I want you to tell them that if they do not change it will only end in disaster for them. I want you to tell them that disaster is not my choice for them, but they will bring it on themselves. But I want you to tell them that I love them far too much to want that to happen. Jeremiah, I want you to tell them that they must change.

But Jeremiah, I’m wondering, what you will do? I’m wondering if you’ll do what I’m asking of you? The people won’t listen and will treat you harshly. Jeremiah, what will you do? I’m wondering, will you run at the first wave of opposition? I’m wondering, will you quit when things get tough? I’m wondering, will you hide when they mock you and reject you and your words?

Jeremiah, I’m wondering will you live cautiously or courageously? I want you to live at your best and reach your full redemptive potential. I want you to become all that you can become. Jeremiah, I know what is easier, I know I’m calling you to a life far beyond what you think you are capable of, far beyond your own strength and ability.

I know there is an easier choice: easier but not more significant; easier but not more fulfilling. I promise to be with you in all this Jeremiah, however hard it gets. I promise to give you everything you need to fulfil your destiny.

And here's the question I have: What is it that you really want Jeremiah? What is it that you really want? Do you want to go along with the rest of the crowd, or do you want to run with the horses? Jeremiah, I love you, and I'm waiting; what will you do?"

My best guess is that Jeremiah took a long time to weigh what God said. My best guess is that he weighed up the challenge, the invitation, carefully and thoroughly. But Jeremiah said "Yes!" to God.

I'm wondering what God might be wanting to say to you in these moments, and in your life right now. And I'm wondering what your response will be?

When we read accounts of people like Jeremiah – which we will be doing in the weeks that follow – we can be tempted to think that what he did was all rather easy and straightforward. But when we understand a little of what was going on at the time he lived, we realise it was anything but.

At the end of the reign of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split into two and became Israel and Judah. The kingdom of Israel was defeated in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians. Judah, in the south continued as a kingdom, but by 586 B.C. Judah fell to the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar. The longest and darkest point in Judah's history, before they were finally exiled to Babylon, was under King Manasseh. Manasseh completely rejected Yahweh and his ways and pursued the gods of Canaan and Assyria. In 2 Kings 21:16 it is recorded that: 'He had filled Jerusalem from one end to the other with innocent blood.'

In the reign of Manasseh two boys were born as God's gift to his people. Josiah, later King Josiah was one. Jeremiah was the other. Into the darkest part of Judah's history up to this point, God brings his light and hope. As we will see, even when God brings light and hope into the darkness, there is a choice to be made.

Perhaps, as you reflect over the past year, or as you reflect on some things in your life right now, it might appear, seem and feel like the darkness. And the truth is, even as followers of Christ, sometimes life is lived in darkness. The darkness that we don't understand what is happening to us, or around, or why it is happening to us, or around us. The darkness of feeling the absence of

God; He remains silent even when we cry out to Him from our innermost being. The darkness of living in the consequences of our own foolish choices, or the choices of others over which we have little or no control.

What we heard over Christmas just past, and what we read again in Jeremiah, is that the light shines in the darkness, and that however dark the darkness is, it can never extinguish the light.

Josiah is the King of Judah remembered for rediscovering the book of the law and for trying to purge the nation of idolatry. Jeremiah is called to be a prophet to the nation of Judah, to call them to follow again the ways Yahweh. Josiah and Jeremiah together, a light in the darkness. Jeremiah is called to speak to the people of Judah, God's beloved and chosen ones, who are steeped in decades of pagan worship, pagan morals and who have no concern for the things of God.

Around Judah other kingdoms are vying for power and hovering with intent. Assyria is on the wane, but a new power is coming to the fore. Babylon is on the up and will become a powerful and destructive kingdom by the time Nebuchadnezzar is on the throne. Josiah will have died in battle but Jeremiah will live long enough to see his prophecy become reality!

I read this the other day:

A friend and I met at a restaurant to have lunch. It was one of those places where the lights are low, and you need a miner's helmet to find your table. We had been seated several minutes before we started looking at the menu and I remarked that I was amazed how easily I could read it. "Yes," said my friend, "It doesn't take us long to get accustomed to the darkness."¹

It seems this had happened to the people of Judah. I wonder how true that is for you and me, right here, today? Perhaps there are parts of our lives that have been so drawn away from God's best, that we can't even see that as the truth anymore.

How about you?

Here's what good and important to remember: God always wants the best for his people – it's the reason he called Jeremiah to speak his words. And God wants the best for you.

¹ Wiersbe, W., "Pause for Power," Chariot Victor Publishing 1998 p 380

What we read in Jeremiah is not ordered chronologically – which is one reason it's a difficult book to grapple with, but what I am about to read happened after Jeremiah was called. What Jeremiah says is for the nation of Judah, the individuals that make up that nation, and Jeremiah himself. And, I think, that what he says in these verses he has, in all probability, experienced himself along with Josiah.

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says:

“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

(Jeremiah 6 v 16)

What seems to have happened in the life of the people of Judah is that they have lost their sense of direction.

Franklin D Roosevelt came to the Presidency of the United States of America in 1933. In his inaugural speech he admitted America had lost its way: “We don't know where we are going,” he said, “but we are on our way.”²

Harvard scholar, Oscar Handlin wrote this in 1996: “At some point, midway into the 20th Century, Europeans and Americans discovered they had lost sense of direction. Formerly, familiar markers along the way had guided their personal and social lives from birth to maturity to death. Now disorientated, they no longer trusted the guide posts and groped in bewilderment toward an unimagined destination. Wandering in the dark, men and women in all Western societies, stumbling blindly along, strained unavailingly for glimpses of recognisable landmarks.”³

How are we doing today, do you think?

With Brexit, independence, immigration, transport, social care, safety, terrorism, threat, violence, uncertainty, loneliness, the gap between rich and poor widening, poverty, starvation, refugee crises...How are we doing today?

² Ryken, P., “*Jeremiah and Lamentations*,” Crossway 2001 page 109

³ Ryken, P., *Ibid*, page 109

I'm wondering how different it is today than in Jeremiah's day.

Jeremiah stood at the crossroads: God called him to speak to a nation and call them back.

Josiah stood at the crossroads – follow in his father's footsteps, or choose the Ancient Paths and restore his kingdom to follow Yahweh again. Jeremiah and Josiah chose the ancient path, they chose to follow God.

I'm wondering: is it possible that at the beginning of a New Year we are at the crossroads? Is it possible that at the beginning of a New Year we stand in a place, where we have before us, the choice to make a change? Is it possible that at the beginning of a New Year we can hear God calling us to recover an ancient path because we have got a little lost?

One of the most haunting experiences I have ever had as a man took place on an early summer day in Alaska. My family and I were sea kayaking with humpback whales in the Icy Strait, and we stopped on the shore of Chichagof Island for lunch. Our guide asked us if we wanted to go for a hike into the interior of the island, to a clearing where grizzlies were known to feed. We were all over that invitation.

After a twenty-minute walk through a spruce forest, we came into what appeared to be a broad, open meadow about four hundred yards across. Being midday, and hot, there were no bears to be seen. "They're sleeping now, through the afternoon. They'll be back tonight," he said. "C'mere — I want to show you something."

The meadow was actually more of a bog, a low-lying jungle of brushy groundcover about two feet high, barely supported underneath by another foot of soaked moss and peat. A very difficult place to walk. Our guide led us to a trail of what seemed to be massive footprints, with a stride of about two feet between them, pressed down into the bog and making a path through it.

"It's a marked trail," he said. A path created by the footprints of the bears. "This one is probably centuries old. For as long as the bears have been on this island, they've taken this path. The cubs follow their elders, putting their feet exactly where the older bears walk. That's how they learn to cross this place."

I began to walk in the marked trail, stepping into the firm, deep-worn places where bears had walked for centuries. I'm not sure how to describe the experience, but for some reason the word holy comes to mind. An ancient and

*fearful path through a wild and untamed place. I was following a proven way, laid down by those much stronger and far more prepared for this place than me. And though I knew I did not belong there, I was haunted by it, could have followed that path for a long, long time. It awakened some deep, ancient yearning in me.*⁴

As we stand at the crossroads of a New Year, we, like Jeremiah and Josiah have a choice. And God is wondering what we will do. Maybe God might say it this way: “Hey Ian, here’s something I want you to know. Life is difficult. But there’s something I want you to know, Ian you are loved beyond your wildest imagining. Ian you are loved with a love which makes you beautiful.

Ian, I long for you to live the best life you can and I want the best for you. Ian, I know this is sometimes hard for you to grasp, but the best way to live is to follow me wholeheartedly. Ian, the best way for you to live is to walk in the Ancient Path. Ian, if you do that you may find life challenging, but I will be with you, above you, below you, to your right and to your left, behind you and in front of you. Ian, I long for you to reach your full redemptive potential. Ian, I long for you to do whatever your hand finds for you to do and for you to do it with all your heart. Ian, there are things that only you can do, things I have given you the gifts, abilities and personality that make them possible.

And Ian, I am calling you now, in these moments, today, to follow me so that I can lead you. And Ian, I’m wondering, what will you do? I’m wondering, will you run at the first sign of trouble? I’m wondering will you quit when things get tough? I’m wondering, will you hide if others think you a bit strange or challenge you? Ian, I’m wondering, will you live cautiously or courageously?

Ian, I’m calling you to a life far beyond what you think you are capable of, far beyond your own strength and abilities. Ian, I know there is an easier choice; easier but not more significant; easier but not more fulfilling. So, Ian my question is this: “What is it that you really want? What is that you really want? Ian, I love you, I’m waiting; what will you do?”

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says:

“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,

⁴ Eldredge, J., “*Fathered by God*,” Thomas Nelson 2009 p ix-x

ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

(Jeremiah 6 v 16)

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