

Jeremiah: On the Wheel

ASKING THE IMPOSSIBLE

I want to set what I say today in a very important context. The context is Jeremiah 1 v 5:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

I know we touched on this last week, but I think there are some important things to engage with for what comes next. And, I think this is important, really important for everything we understand about Jeremiah and ourselves. It seems to me, if we read this verse carefully, it throws up some things for us to think about and wrestle with.

What does it mean that God knew Jeremiah before he was born and set him apart? And what, therefore, does it mean, or what might it mean for you and me today? Is it, as it might seem, suggesting some sort of divine blueprint for Jeremiah, and therefore, for you and me?

Perhaps another way of asking it might be this: is it all set out and decided from eternity past to eternity future? And if that's so, what part do I really have to play in all this? And, crucially, what kind of God do I end up with? Here's my best understanding right now - I will preach only that of which I am convinced – but I might be wrong! See what you think!

First, I want to remind us of something we touched on last week. Life doesn't begin with me, it begins with God. My identity doesn't begin as I begin to understand myself. There is something going on before that and it is what God thinks of me. And, before we knew anything about ourselves, or about God, God singled us out as important! This truth means that life is not a puzzle that we must figure out. Rather, as we come to God he reveals to us the truth about our lives: we are his treasured possession, and we are part of God's far bigger and far better story. We appear in the middle of God's bigger and better story, one that he began and that he will bring to completion. God knows me and loves me, he has chosen me and invited me to be caught up in his story.

Jeremiah was chosen and so are we. We are chosen for something important that God is doing!

What is God doing? He is healing; he is saving; he is rescuing; he is blessing; he is providing; he is judging; he is revealing himself. There is a spiritual battle at work though, because of the one who wants to kill, steal and destroy. There is evil, cruelty, superstition, ignorance, suffering, pain and the battle rages moment by moment, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year.

God is fighting for life and hope and love and heaven.

Jeremiah, before he was born, was chosen to be on God's side. And, friends, so were we. And like Jeremiah we have a choice: do we choose and take up the life God has for us, or do we choose to reject it? God is out to win the world in love. Jeremiah was set apart to do it with him. And so are you!

Before you were born he chose you for his side, now he waits to see if we choose him.

Jeremiah was 'anointed' as a prophet before he was born. To anoint means to give – literally God gave Jeremiah to the nations as a prophet. Giving is what God does, he is lavishly generous. For God so loved, he gave, and God gives you and me, in love!

You are God's gift in all the places you are, his gift to a world fighting a spiritual battle. You are God's gift on your frontline: at work; with your colleagues; in your family; at the school gates; in the lunch club; at the gym; in Sainsbury's; in OneVoice Community Choir; down the pub; in the dance class; with your friends. God so loves that he gives you, everywhere, whatever your hand finds for you to do. And we are most like God when we give.

Jeremiah had a choice - what would he give his life to?

The question becomes: What will you give your life to?

Jeremiah says – "No! I am not giving my life to that!"

"Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." (Jeremiah 1 v 1-6)

Maybe Tolkien had Jeremiah in mind when he wrote the 'Fellowship of the Ring.' When the hobbit Frodo is chosen to make a long and perilous journey to destroy the one remaining ring of power, he says this: "I am not made for

perilous quests... I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?"

It seems Jeremiah felt the same, and maybe you do too: following God can be difficult. Jeremiah was going to be a priest, a job he knew how to do and was expecting and expected to do! That was certainly an easier choice than becoming a prophet. Easier, but not more significant; easier but not more fulfilling.

The job of a prophet is a difficult one because a prophet makes it difficult to continue with a sloppy or selfish life! Nobody likes a prophet! If Jeremiah is going to reach his full redemptive potential in the bigger and better story of God, then he will be a prophet. Perhaps we are like Jeremiah: we are pretty good at pleading inadequacy in order to avoid living the best that God calls us to: "I can't do that; I'm not clever enough; I'm not confident enough; I'm not old enough; I'm too old; I don't have the time; I don't have the energy; I'm only a mum; I'm only a dad..."

In response to Frodo's questioning, Gandalf the Wizard says this: "Such questions cannot be answered...You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess, not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."

I'm thinking God's response to Jeremiah might be similar: "Because, before you were born, I chose you to be on my side. You are my gift to Judah and the nations."

I'm wondering: could it be that God would say the same to you, wherever he's called you to and whatever he's given you to do? "I'm, I've chosen you before you were born to be on my side. You are my gift in all the places you go. Tell them about me!"

How about you?

Jeremiah, just like you and me, struggled. So what changed his mind?

⁷ But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

⁹ Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over

nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

¹¹ The word of the LORD came to me: “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

“I see the branch of an almond tree,” I replied.

¹² The LORD said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.”

¹³ The word of the LORD came to me again: “What do you see?”

“I see a pot that is boiling,” I answered. “It is tilting toward us from the north.”

¹⁴ The LORD said to me, “From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. ¹⁵ I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms,” declares the LORD.

“Their kings will come and set up their thrones
in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem;
they will come against all her surrounding walls
and against all the towns of Judah.

¹⁶ I will pronounce my judgments on my people
because of their wickedness in forsaking me,
in burning incense to other gods
and in worshiping what their hands have made.

¹⁷ “Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them.

¹⁸ Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. ¹⁹ They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 1 v 7-19)

It seems that God gives Jeremiah two visions that help him change his mind. The first is a vision of an almond tree

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In Anathoth where Jeremiah was born, the almond blossom was the first sign of spring, it is always first to blossom. When God spoke to Jeremiah there was blossom on the almond tree. Spring brings the promise of summer.

In his response to Jeremiah, God uses a play on words to teach Jeremiah something that will be significant for him in his ministry. The words for watching and almond in Hebrew sound very similar. In fact, they come from the same word – the word for watching or waking. The almond tree was the waking tree, the first one to wake up after the winter. It was also the watching tree, the tree you watched to see the coming of spring. God's point to Jeremiah: God is wide awake; he is not asleep, he does not slumber; he never goes into hibernation; he is still on watch; he is wide awake, watching and waiting.

God is watching to ensure that everything he promised comes to pass. God is watching to make sure his word is fulfilled. God is saying to Jeremiah, that not one of the words he hears God speak will get lost or wander off. Not one. He will bring each word to some kind of living completion. God is saying that he is doing everything he has promised to do, and that when it looks like he is doing nothing, he is waiting for his word to burst into flower. His word is not dead, never dead; it is alive and it is starting to blossom.

God is saying, you can no more prevent God's word being fulfilled than you can prevent an almond tree blossoming in spring. And every spring, when he saw that almond tree blossom, Jeremiah would be reminded of that deep truth.

We all need that kind of vision when we are on God's side. We all need to be reminded of what God has spoken to us when we are living the life of faith. We need reminders that God will do, and is doing, what he said he would do.

Bill McLellan gave me this mirror when I was called to this particular ministry. He left it for me to figure out why! It says to me: Ian, however hard it is to look in this mirror, see yourself as God sees you! This mirror has sustained me in ministry! I'm wondering how God sustains you?

The second vision is the boiling pot. A boiling pot was a common thing in Jeremiah's world. In both visions God uses the ordinary to speak his extraordinary word. The vision has the boiling pot tilted toward the south – toward the people of God in Judah. The boiling water will flow into Judah: the image of the invading armies who will come to destroy Judah and Jerusalem, and it is not a pretty picture. The people of Judah would bring God's judgement on themselves. The Babylonians will, in time, invade from the

north and destroy Judah and Jerusalem. The people of Judah refused to listen, and God will use the Babylonian army to wash the land.

The invading war would interrupt the lives of the people of Judah and force them to attend to, what is both essential and eternal: the truth about God and his relationship with his people. No-one needed a vision to tell them of the threat from the north. They did, though, need a vision to show them that evil has limits.

We can, and do, see evil flourish: terrorism; child abduction; sex trafficking; poverty; abuse of power; dictators. Jeremiah will later say: “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?” (Jeremiah 17 v 9 N.L.T.)

And yet the vision of the boiling pot tells that evil has limits. Evil is not everywhere and evil is not everything. There is a bigger and a better story in which evil is limited. We cannot afford to ignore the evil we see and know and sometimes experience. But we must not be intimidated by it either. The vision tells that the evil of men will be used by God to bring about good because God, in his love and wisdom, will use the evil of people to fulfil his word.

In ways that we will never understand, but perhaps see perfectly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is the truth that in God’s bigger and better story, evil becomes what God uses to bring about Salvation.

Jeremiah sees two visions that changed his mind and held him in faith, one that God’s word brings life and truth, one that held him in the bigger and far better story of God.

Friends, if we are going to be able to say “Yes!” to God’s call on our lives, we need the help of Jeremiah. We, like Jeremiah, need a vision of God’s word, we must trust it, and trust it, even when we do not see it. Then we can live, alive and responsive to all that he is doing. We, like Jeremiah, must put evil in its proper place and neither ignore it or be intimidated by it, because we live the truth of God’s bigger and better story – that evil is defeated at the cross.

So, friends, how are you doing?

Born into the middle of God’s magnificent, far bigger and far better story.

Chosen to be on God’s side from before you were born.

Chosen before you were born to win the world in love, win God.

Given by God as a gift in all the places that you go, in every moment of every day.

Living in the truth that God is awake and watching and doing everything his word has promised he will do.

Living in the truth that evil is defeated at the cross, and knowing deep in your heart that he knows you by your name...

How will you respond to the call to participate with God in his far bigger and far better story? An impossible task? God will leave it to you to decide...

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