

September 5

Scriptures: Read Jeremiah 16 & 17

Key Verse: “Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for You are my praise.” (Jeremiah 17:14)

Overview

The life of the prophets was often used as a further means of communicating their message (e.g. Isa. 8:3-4, 18; Hos. 1:1-9; Ezk. 24:15-27. Jeremiah’s instruction from God was that he remain celibate; this was something unusual, especially for a priest. In so doing, Jeremiah would reinforce the truth of his message. It was not a time for enjoyment or for having children, since even the children would not be spared from the Babylonians’ swords and captivity. This calamity would come upon the people of Judah because the Lord had taken away from them His peace, lovingkindness, and mercy. Therefore, not only did they lack physical protection, but their hearts and minds were also left unguarded (16:5; cf. Phil. 4:7; Isa. 26:3).

The people were so hardened and their consciences were so corrupted that they did not even recognize how they had sinned against God. Jeremiah was to explain to them that the judgment of God would come because they were even worse than their fathers. Not only had they forsaken God, but they lived as though God did not exist by following after “the imagination” of their own evil hearts (16:12), which included idolatry. Their many sins were crimes that defiled the land, and for this they would “repay double” (16:18; cf. Ex. 22:4, 7).

Although they lost God’s favour, the Lord would still keep a watchful eye over them. Just as He said He would winnow (15:7), so too He would send “fishermen” and “hunters” to bring a further separation, that only His desired remnant would be left (16:16). These He would bring back from the Captivity; it would be like a new Exodus (16:14-15).

As Jeremiah foresees God’s gracious gathering of His people, he looks further into the future to a time when God’s remnant would be joined by believing Gentiles from all over the world who recognize that living apart from the Covenant with God is worthless and unprofitable. Concerning the Gentiles, the Lord said: “they shall know that My name is the Lord [Yahweh]” (16:21). It would be through Jesus Christ that God would cause the Gentiles to know His hand and His might so that they might believe that He is Lord.

In chapter 17, Judah’s inevitable judgment is further illustrated, for her sins were indelible, as though engraved upon their hard hearts. What a horrible and terrifying picture of the hearts of the people — upon them would be written their sins instead of the law of God (31:33; Heb. 10:16). In God’s provision of atonement, the hearts of His people were to be cleansed by the spilt blood of the sacrifice (cf. Heb. 9:12-14). The blood would also be applied to the horns of the altar of sweet incense. In the case of a repentant ruler, the blood was to be applied to the horns of the altar of burnt offering (cf. Lev. 4:7, 18, 25, 30), symbolizing that their lives were consecrated to God so that their prayers and offerings would be acceptable to Him. The people of Judah, however, had unclean hearts. Therefore, their sacrifices to God were defiled and abominable, for they were idolatrous and offered sacrifices on pagan altars. The horns of the altar, therefore, were

covered with their sin and guilt (not the blood of atonement), so their supplications to the Lord would not be answered (17:1; 11:11).

Jeremiah's bold statement ("cursed", 17:5) was likely directed against one of the faithless kings of Judah who were always turning to other nations, such as Egypt, to help them from the threats of their northern enemies. The true prophets had told them, however, to trust only in God, for then they would experience His blessing, and as Jeremiah quoted from Psalm 1:3, they would become like a fruitful and prosperous "tree planted by the water". Why would anyone choose the bad over the good? It does not make sense. The explanation given is that the heart is deceitful and wicked, being incurably diseased and corrupted as a result of the Fall of man (17:9; Deut. 10:6; Isa. 44:20; cf. Matt. 15:19).

God, who sees the heart, also searches it out to give each person "according to his ways" (17:10; Rom. 2:6; Rev. 2:23). He brings judgment upon those whom He sees are covetous (17:11), mockers, and doubters (17:15); they will be blown away like writing in the dust (17:13; cf. John 8:6). Finally, God's judgment is upon those who disobey His laws, such as not observing the Sabbath which was the Old Covenant's sign of one's sanctification to God (17:19-27; cf. Ex. 31:13). Chronologically, this message about the sabbath likely preceded the messages in the last two chapters and may have been preached shortly after Josiah's death, when the keeping of the law was no longer enforced. On the positive side, God is delighted to find an obedient servant whom He can bless, such as Jeremiah who, despite being mocked for the sake of his message, had great faith in God's power to heal and save (17:14; cf. Matt. 5:10-12).

Prayer

You, Lord, search the heart and mind of man. Search ours. Root out whatever displeases You, that we might bring You delight and know Your power to heal and to save.