

Jeremiah, The Reluctant Preacher

by Roger Chambers

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Did you read about the time Jeremiah quit the ministry? He did not quit like Paul's associate minister Demas did. Whatever reason Demas gave to Paul when he left, Paul knew the real cause of the defection. It was because "...he loved this present world."

Jeremiah did not quit like those pure spirits who find the local church beneath their rarefied natures and who righteously burn their collection of sermon books, file their ordination certificates under "old business" and go sell tombstones or teach English. (And become experts on the local ministry!)

"Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in His name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I cannot contain." (Jeremiah 20:9).

Jeremiah quit the ministry in the way a genuine preacher might resign on Monday morning. (One preacher observed that he glad that salvation does not depend on one's feelings, because if it did and the Lord returned on Monday, half the preachers in town would be lost.)

Jeremiah tried to quit on God, but could not, and so he continued his prophetic ministry reluctantly. His was the reluctance of Moses who tried to quit before he began because he stuttered. His was the reluctance of Amos who admitted that he had not been born to nor trained for the office of prophet. He was born to pinch fruit and chase sheep. But he allowed that since he was in this work, he would have to preach it straight and preach it true. His was the reluctance of Paul who confessed to the Corinthians that when he had been in their pulpit it had been with "...weakness, fear, and much trembling."

"Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel...if I do this willingly I have a reward, but if against my will (reluctantly), I have a stewardship entrusted to me." (I Corinthians 9:16, 17).

The ministry is spiritual work. Reluctance is a proper attitude. The alternative is to become a smooth, polished, confidant, professional which is the shame of heaven and joy of hell.

I. JEREMIAH WAS RELUCTANT BECAUSE OF THE PRESUMPTION OF PREACHING

"Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and

before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, *and* I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I *am* a child. But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I *am* a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak....Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth." Jeremiah 1:4ff).

That is exactly what we are, Jeremiah, children! The sheer presumption, the unmitigated gall of a man who stands up to speak for God! How dare we casually saunter into such a ministry! We ought not reproduce the foolishness of the well-intentioned but careless Uzzah who grasped the Ark of the Covenant as it was being transported to Jerusalem. It is an awesome thing to preach the Word of God. We ought to handle the Word with the same reluctance with which an engineer handles dynamite.

And if we accept the ministry of preaching, we ought to have enough fear to stick to that divine task. "Preach the Word," said Paul to Timothy. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." How dare we continually bless the congregation with our opinions and thereby cease to be preachers in favor of being commentators. "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (I Corinthians 2:4).

The professors here at the Seminary have waged holy war against the practice of preaching without proper grammar and vocabulary. This is good and needful. It is a real possibility that people can be turned away from the gospel and be lost because of dangling participles and double negatives. But we have raised up a generation of preachers who are so articulate that the people cannot find out if they are saved or lost because the preacher is wondering around in *Webster's Unabridged*. We have got so many three-dollar words that there is no issue so clear that it is not thoroughly clouded by the time we get through talking about it. We baptize our doubts in pseudo-sanctified jargon and then labor under the impression that we have changed something when at best we have only redefined it. (For example, many prefer the term "unchurched" to "lost." What in the world does "unchurched" mean?) This is no situation so bad but what we can make it respectable by a storm of words. Our doubletalk is like that inscribed on a tombstone is a western frontier cemetery:

TO LEM S. FRAME

Who during his short life shot 89 Indians,
Whom the Lord delivered into his hands,

And who was looking forward to making up
His hundred before the end of the year,
When he fell asleep in Jesus at his house
At Hawk's Ferry

March 27, 1845

We need more than conversation, we need conversion!

God promised Jeremiah that He would put His own words in the prophet's mouth. Have you read lately the burning, direct, clinical, scathing language of Jeremiah? He was preaching desolation and misery and judgement while the certified prophets of his day were shouting "peace, peace, peace." I can picture the professional clergy remonstrating with the prophet for his cutting oratory and devastating condemnations:

Enter the President of the SHALOM LEAGUE OF PROPHETS (S.L.O.P.).

President: "Brother Jeremiah, should not the clergy be more careful in using the term, 'Thus saith the Lord'?"

Jeremiah: "What do you think I am preaching, *The Farmer's Almanac*?"

President: "But to suggest that God would say that everyone neighed after his neighbors wife like corn-fed horses seems to malign the dignity of God."

Jeremiah: "I see you got the message!"

President: "But the sight of a people running up and down the streets of Jerusalem saying that if we could find one honest man God would pardon the city looks bad to visitors from the outside."

Jeremiah: "By the way, if you see one, send him my way. My feet are killing me."

President: "But preacher, the people come to the temple for a restful dignified worship experience, and you tell them of God's anger, they want a more positive message."

Jeremiah: "You can catch Rabbi Norman Vincent Peale at 3:00 P.M. on channel 7."

President: "Now Jeremiah, about this word 'repent.' I would be more comfortable using a phrase like: 'Restudy your value systems'."

Jeremiah: "Then you need to repent!"

President: "But sir, to describe Judah as a nation pursuing idols as a camel in heat pursues a mate is language unbecoming a gentleman and a scholar."

Jeremiah: "Funny you should say that. I told God He ought to get a gentleman and a scholar for this job, but He wanted me."

"Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer *that* breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29).

"For the word of God *is* quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and *is* a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12).

The Word of God burns and shatters and exposes and meets man as he is in his most secret hideaway, *and nothing else will do that!* So let us preach the Word! Let us stop feeding our people warmed-over Baptist pulpit pablum!

Let us not depend on the power of "dynamics" and "Church factors" to get the job done. Every preacher ought to be aware of those principles which lend themselves to a growing program. But do we not know that if we use the methods which touch universal human nature we can program people into the local congregation while we preach Mother Goose Rhymes? The sects are doing just that while preaching messages which make Old Mother Hubbard sound pretty good. If we do not preach the Word as it is, folk are not going to ask the right questions, face the real issues, and make the right kind of changes in their lives.

When Jeremiah got through with his sermons, he was not very popular, but everyone had a pretty good idea of what he was getting at. Let us have done with this babel which produces a climate in which we cannot tell the difference between denominations and the Lord's Church.

II. JEREMIAH WAS RELUCTANT BECAUSE OF THE PERIL OF PREACHING

What a scene as Jehoiakim sits in the winter palace cutting up Jeremiah's written prophecy piece by piece and throws it in the fire. And there is Jeremiah up to his knees in mud in that dungeon where one would not put a dog. Picture the prophet as he waits out the last days of Jerusalem in the local jail.

We have all thrown a few of our own sermons in the fire after we have preached them lest the Lord return and find us with the incriminating evidence. But in the main our preaching is pretty respectable. And that is just the peril of the preaching ministry, respectability! This is not to say that we ought not to be competent. Our preaching

must be respectable in the sense of demonstrating the careful effort befitting a disciple of Jesus. I have preached some sermons so bad that it seems a miracle that the people could sit through them and come out the other side still believing in God. We all have our bad ones. But we do not have to be like the hen that swallowed the yo-yo and laid the same egg twenty times.

The truth is never respectable in a world dominated by lies, and Christ is never respectable in a world under the influence of anti-Christ. The people were divided over Jeremiah's preaching. Some hated his message, the rest hated him. The day of mercy is too far spent for us to be contented with anemic preaching from bloodless little Lord Fauntleroy who "mean well." If our preaching produces neither positive nor negative reaction, then we can be sure it is not God's Word that we are speaking. (The comment was heard from one pulpit, "If I preached this sermon in Russia, I would be shot for it. Still. It would be nice to get *some* reaction.")

God save us from the harmless respectability of much modern preaching!

III. JEREMIAH WAS RELUCTANT BECAUSE OF THE PASSION OF PREACHING

"My heart, my heart! I am pained at my very heart; my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war." (Jeremiah 4:19).

The prophet's heart was broken by the scene of the destruction of Jerusalem which was to be so complete that it would be like creation in reverse.

In the last few months of its operation, an average of 6,000 Jews a day were gassed at Auschwitz. The crematoria were unable to keep pace in reducing this daily number of corpses to ashes, and so pyres of a thousand corpses each were ignited in the open. The flames and smoke were visible for eighteen miles. A pall of smoke with the smell of burning flesh hung heavily over Auschwitz and drew swarms of flies! A microcosm of hell!

How can we casually approach the task of preaching if we're really haunted by the prospect of uncounted millions being in hell for eternity?! We ought to approach the preaching ministry reluctantly because the heart from which all true preaching comes is a broken one.

I am concerned about the rising sentiment that says that the gospel is a groovy thing. Christianity is fun. Jesus swings. Turn on with Christ. I am for enthusiasm and the joy that is in Christ. But let us not confuse the "smiling-through-tears" of Christianity with the painless giggle of the world. And what about the cross? And what about the lost? There is no greater contradiction under heaven than the preacher or the seminary student who is only committed to being "cool." It is right for Bill Cosby, but it

is wrong for a Christian. "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost."

Jeremiah tried to quit that task which seems too great for any man. But despite the PRESUMPTION of preaching and the PERIL of preaching, the Word was still a fire shut up in his bones, and he went on because of the PASSION of preaching.

Preach the Word!