

True Word for tough times

Dale Ralph Davis

 **BOOKS**

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Preface

The following pages contain messages given at the Aberystwyth Conference in August 2010. They have appeared in this printed form because Mrs Jennifer Eveson willingly endured the literary purgatory of turning recorded messages into written material. Huge thanks to her for both her skill and — undoubtedly — her anguish!

I have ‘touched up’ and clarified this written form at points, but all remains substantially as originally delivered. These expositions were preached (except the fifth, which was a lecture), and I have not smoothed out the preaching style; hence the frequent roughness and ‘choppiness’ of the prose. Translations of the biblical text are often my own. Occasionally I paraphrase parts of the text; these, I think, are readily recognizable.

There was no human motivation for choosing the prophecy of Jeremiah for these messages, except convenience and fascination. I happened to be working in Jeremiah at the time a decision had to be made about ‘what to preach’ at Aberystwyth. But I am also strangely fascinated by both Jeremiah’s prophecy and his ministry. His was a ministry without perks and lacking conventional

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encouragements. I infer that grace must be real because Jeremiah endured to the end. That both fascinates and heartens me.

Of course, when one has to choose five passages to preach out of a long book like Jeremiah, one has to be selective. The sections I chose tend to focus on the 'negative' side of Jeremiah's ministry, his 'pulling up' and 'throwing down' work (*cf.* Jer. 1:10). Don't let that give you a skewed view of Jeremiah; remember that he had a 'building and planting' ministry as well. Note the way he preached 'a future and a hope' in chapters 30 - 33 (though that hope was not for his own contemporaries). However, I have focused on 'down' passages, partly because I think they supply a healthy corrective to some of the flippant and flimsy optimism we meet in certain 'Christian' propaganda about the Christian life and ministry. My prayer is that a number of the Lord's servants who are slogging on in the paths of righteousness will, by the Spirit's chemistry, be strangely comforted by this tormented prophet and the 'ruthless Warrior' who stood at his side.

Dale Ralph Davis
July 2013

Astounding Word

Jeremiah 1

As we begin to consider the book of Jeremiah, we note first of all that it is the longest prophetic book as regards content in the canon of Scripture. An initial reading might suggest a lack of coherence, as matters are not presented in precise chronological order. But there is more coherence than many critics might think.

Jeremiah began his ministry around 627 BC, when the LORD called him and so God's Word came to Jeremiah. You notice that there is no distinction made between the divine and the human word. The chapter opens with 'These are the words of Jeremiah' followed immediately by the statement that the Word of Yahweh came to him. Then you will notice in verse 9 that the Lord expresses it in Hebrew as 'My words in your mouth': a divine word, a human word — perhaps a mystery, but no conflict.

I do not know what the plumbing is like in the UK. One of the things we have in some of our bathrooms in the States is a little device called a shut-off valve. Once in a while, perhaps, because grandchildren love to stuff toilet tissue down the toilet, you may

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have had the experience of the toilet pan threatening to overflow. Well, under the toilet tank is that little shut-off valve, a little oval handle, and you just turn it clockwise: it shuts the water off within half an inch and you are safe. You generally do not think much about that shut-off valve — it is a very ordinary thing. You know it is there but you do not pay much attention to it — it is just part of the furniture. When you have to use it, you say, ‘Well, that is brilliant! That is ingenious! That is wonderful!’ Something may seem very ordinary and then it can suddenly strike you as being a marvellous affair.

I think sometimes the Word of God is like that in the church. There are times, sadly, when we regard the Word of God as rather ordinary. It has just been with us (thankfully); it is just there so we may not regard it as really quite astounding. But I think Jeremiah 1 is telling us that this is an astounding Word.

Why are we talking about the Word? Well, because it mentions in the text the call of the prophet. If it was the call of a philosopher we would be talking about arguments; if it was the call of a cook we would be talking about food; if it was the call of a mechanic we would be talking about tools; and if it was the call of a butcher we would be talking about meat. But it is the call of a prophet, so we talk about the Word of God. The point about the Word of God is that it really is an astounding Word. Why is the Word of God astounding? To answer the question let’s examine the text in detail.

Relentless Word

First of all, the Word of God is astounding because it is so relentless. Verses 1-3 start off with a brief genealogy, geography and history, all of which may not interest you particularly. But you must notice the times.

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Yahweh's Word came in religious times

The Word of Yahweh came, first of all, in religious times — it came ‘in the days of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign [627 BC]’. This is when Jeremiah apparently began his public ministry — in the days of Josiah. What a marvellous time that was! In a way it came as a relief because, after half a century of almost complete paganism, especially in the reign of Manasseh, Josiah came to the throne and he instituted reform: reform of worship and sacraments, which also included a renewed commitment to Yahweh.

However, if you read Jeremiah 3:10, it seems that the reform under Josiah may have been rather superficial. It was an official overall kind of outward reform which may not have had much effect on the people. But it was far better than Manasseh's time. Yahweh's Word came in religious times.

Yahweh's Word came in hostile times

It kept on coming (v. 3): ‘in the days of Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, king of Judah’. Jehoiakim was hostile, and had no qualms about getting rid of the prophets. In chapter 26 Uriah had prophesied like Jeremiah, and Jehoiakim did not like it. His intention was to seize Uriah and dispose of him; but Uriah fled to Egypt. However, Jehoiakim sent his ‘Gestapo’ to Egypt, brought him back and liquidated him. That is the way Jehoiakim dealt with messengers of the Word.

In chapter 36, a scroll that Baruch had transcribed at Jeremiah's dictation was being read to Jehoiakim. Some of his courtiers had already heard the scroll read and believed what it said, so they wanted this word, which consisted almost entirely of judgement, to be read to Jehoiakim because of the danger the country was in. It

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was winter and Jehoiakim was sitting before the fire in his quarters or his royal flat, and when Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, Jehoiakim took his penknife, cut it off, flicked it into the fire and burned it up. That is what Jehoiakim thought about the Word of God. But the Word of Yahweh came in the days of Jehoiakim. They were hostile times, but the Word of Yahweh kept on coming.

Yahweh's Word came in nervous times

You notice in the middle of verse 3 that the word came until the completion of 'the eleventh year of Zedekiah, son of Josiah, king of Judah'. Zedekiah was the last king of Judah before the people were taken in the final wave of exile in 587 BC. Zedekiah is an interesting fellow. You read of him in Jeremiah 38. He was the kind of person who got up every morning and checked the papers and the ratings and the polls to see where he was. To Zedekiah no issue was so great that you could not flip-flop over it. He was always up and down, a 'yo-yo' king. But Yahweh's Word came in those times as well.

Yahweh's Word came in disastrous times

You notice that the end of verse 3 reads 'until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month' (that is, of the eleventh year of Zedekiah). The Word of Yahweh came in disastrous times when the Babylonians breached the city, when the other fortified cities of Judah were already taken, when they burned the temple, when they knocked down the walls and took the last wave of the people into exile.

The first part of verse 2 says that 'the Word of Yahweh came'. In verse 3 the verb form is a bit different and can be translated quite rightly, 'and it went on coming in the days of Jehoiakim'. It just went on 'coming'. In times of superficial religion (Josiah), of hardened

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indifference (Jehoiakim), in days of weak compromise (Zedekiah), in days of national disaster, the Word of God kept on coming. It is relentless; it is unstoppable; it simply keeps on coming, no matter what the climate seems to be, no matter what the circumstances are.

Isn't God kind? You see what these three almost boring verses in the first chapter of Jeremiah are teaching you? That Yahweh does not leave his people without direction even in the darkest of times. God's Word comes even in the days of Jehoiakim, when they destroy and ignore his Word. Is he not still kind to us? In a day when the church loves gimmicks and glitz and amplifiers, even in the so-called evangelical church where there does not seem to be much appetite for either the written Word or the preached Word, it is still here. The Word of Yahweh is so relentless and that is why it is so astounding.

Fragile Word

Secondly, the Word of God is astounding because it is so fragile. Look at verses 4-9 and particularly at verses 4-6. The word comes to Jeremiah individually; note verse 4, 'the word of Yahweh came to me'. Then in verse 5, among other things Yahweh said, 'I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Jeremiah knew that being a prophet means speaking the Word of God and he responds to the Lord in verse 6, 'Ah, Lord Yahweh, I do not know how to speak, for I am a youth.' The word 'youth' has the idea of inexperience; it is a flexible term. You have to go by the context as to how you understand it in terms of designating age; but he probably was not very old at all. However, the stress seems to be on the experiential barrier that Jeremiah feels — his lack of experience.

At the same time, there is a social barrier. John Mackay points this out in his commentary when he indicates that in such a culture

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people would be more likely to listen to older people. You have the wise elders and the people with some age and experience and these are the ones you approach for counsel and direction. But here is this slip of a youth, probably a teenager, and Yahweh has called him to speak his Word. Who is going to listen to a youngster like that? You begin to realize that he has no social clout and yet God calls him to be a prophet.

We have to ask why God keeps doing this. We have seen it before. Why does God seem to sabotage his own programme by the way he carries it out? Why does he do that? It seems to be a practice he has been carrying on for some time. Why did he take a pagan idolater who could not have children and use him to establish his people in this world? You remember that that is true of Abraham. You remember Joshua 24:2-3. Abraham was not someone who was looking for new light. No, Joshua said that Abraham and Nahor and their father, Terah, served other gods beyond the river. Abraham was a pagan. Then we have these marvellous words in Joshua 24:3: 'Then I took your father Abraham'. He took a man and his wife Sarai — and in Genesis 11:30 he said that Sarai was barren; she had no child. And that fact hangs like a shadow over ten or eleven chapters of Genesis, as the promise about many descendants looks as if it will never come to pass. Will there ever be a people of God in this world? Why does God work that way? He calls a pagan idolater who cannot have children and then later he calls a devious schemer like Jacob who can.

Then you have an eighty-year-old failure who seems to have lost his vision for the deliverance of his people when you read about Moses in Exodus. It makes us wonder. You notice that he calls Jephthah, an illegitimate freebooter who is despised and rejected by men, to work a partial deliverance for his people (Judg. 11). Why does he have dealings with people like that? But this is a pattern. He takes the youngest child of a family of seven or eight sons, who was not

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even thought important enough to invite to the king's selection ceremony and dinner (1 Sam. 16). So you have David.

Why does Yahweh do that? Why does God keep using people like this who always seem to have some defect or deficiency? It almost makes you say, 'OK. What kind of loser is the Lord going to call this time?'

It happens sometimes in history. For example, there was a president in the United States by the name of John Tyler. I think he was the tenth president. He was actually vice-president and at home in Williamsburg, Virginia, when he received word that the president, William Henry Harrison, had died. Harrison had been unwise, reading out his two-hour-long inauguration address in bitterly cold weather without being suitably attired. He fell ill and died within a month. So much for long sermons!! But sadly, unlike many presidents who were well off financially, Tyler was not wealthy at all. He didn't even have the money to make the trip to Washington. So his friends clubbed together and loaned him the money so that he could attend his own inauguration. That is just not very presidential; it does not fit the mould.

It is a similar situation in Jeremiah. Why does God follow this practice? Why does he take such fragile, weak, in some way disqualified people for his service? In Jeremiah's case, though, this is a step that God took long ago. You notice in verse 5, 'Before I formed you in the belly I knew you and before you came forth from the womb I had set you apart and appointed you a prophet to the nations.' This happened before Jeremiah was even conceived. So what matters is not Jeremiah's competence or qualifications particularly, but rather God's decision. It all rests on that.

You might wonder what this has to do with us. We are not prophets. Certainly, I am not a prophet. You might claim to be one. I am not.