

THE HOLY SPIRIT AMONG THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

The New Testament encourages us to study the Old Testament in order to learn about God's work during that period. "Now these (Old Testament) things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Paul also wrote to the Romans, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

The Apostle Peter verified the Old Testament prophets spoke as guided by the Holy Spirit. "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ, and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven--things into which angels long to look" (1 Peter 1:10-12). "And so we have the prophetic word made more sure to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all that no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:19-21).

Obviously time does not permit us to demonstrate how the Holy Spirit worked through all of the Old Testament prophets. I have chosen to give a brief overview of how He worked through Jeremiah the Prophet as recorded in the book named after him. He lived out the experience of all the prophets before him in the battle that each fought to get Israel to be faithful to Jehovah who had blessed them and rescued them, only for the people to turn away from Him to follow the patterns of their contemporaries. This pattern was recurrent throughout the Old Testament. We get some idea of how hard it is to reverse the flow of history once it begins to move in an unholy direction.

Jeremiah was the prophet through whom God worked from about 626 BC until after 586 BC during the years when the evil of the southern kingdom of Judah had reached such a level that God acted dramatically. He raised up Babylon to bring the bulk of the Jerusalem centered southern kingdom into captivity, to destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem. This covered the time between the reign of good king Josiah and all the other kings until the last one, Zedekiah, was captured by Nebuchadnezzar, who killed Zedekiah's sons and then blinded him and took him to Babylon where he died (2 Kings 25:1-7).

God calls Jeremiah in about 626 BC during the reign of king Josiah, a call to continue until sometime after the Babylonian exile in about 586 BC. The Lord tells Jeremiah that He knew him before he was formed in the womb. When Jeremiah refused the Lord's invitation because of his youth (late teens or early twenties), and inability to speak, the Lord touches Jeremiah's mouth assuring him he would put the words in his mouth. He also guarantees that while he would be resisted, he would not be overcome by the people reacting to God's teaching through him (Jeremiah 1:1-19). It is important to remember that throughout the book of Jeremiah, it is the Holy Spirit that is speaking through Jeremiah.

THE CONDITION OF GOD'S PEOPLE (ff. quotes are from the book of Jeremiah):

(1) They had rejected God to follow false gods (2:1-13). As a result God stopped blessing them and refused to turn their enemies away. He even ordered Jeremiah to not pray for them (7:16, 11:14), and not to eat with them (16:5-9).

(2) Because the people of Judah wanted to "have their own way", they followed the evil example of Israel, and eventually exceeded her in doing evil (3:5-11).

(3) When the Lord tried to correct them, they refused to follow His orders (6:16).

(4) A root cause of the terrible spiritual fall of the Jewish people leading to the Babylonian captivity was the moral defection of the priests and the prophets (23:9-17). Under such perverse spiritual leadership the people's consciences became dysfunctional to the point they lost their ability even to blush (6:15). Abandoning God's moral order led them eventually to lose their ability to feel natural affection as shown by their worshipping Baal which featured having sex with male and female temple prostitutes. When they tried to receive God's blessing while they were unrepentant, God said, "Why should I pardon you? Your sons have forsaken Me and sworn by those who are not gods. When I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the harlot's house. They were well fed lusty horses, each one neighing after his neighbor's wife" (5:7-8). "The language of adultery and prostitution indicates that the particular forms of idolatry were those associated with the fertility cults, especially that of Baal, (World Biblical Commentary, Jeremiah p. 88, Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard Jr., Word Books, Dallas, 1991). Note again that the priests and prophets led the people into sin by their example (23:13-15). This loss of natural affection is also shown in their burning their children as a part of their worship (7:30-34, 19:5, 32:35). Imagine the condition of the homes of those who dedicated themselves to adultery, and to the slaughter of their own children!

(5) The Holy Spirit's message through Jeremiah to the people and to the rulers was that it was their sin which had brought upon them the wrath of God (21:3-10, 13:22-27, 22:8-9).

(6) Jeremiah did not have an easy road to follow. He received death sentences (11:21, 26:2-8), he suffered beatings (20:1-2, 37:15), he was put into a cistern to die (38:1-13), and he was given repeated imprisonments (32;2, 33;1, 37:21, 38:28, 39:15).

(7) There are messianic messages in Jeremiah. An interesting one has to do with the prophecies of the "branch" (23:5, 33:15), which are understood to refer ultimately to Christ. The best known messianic passage is quoted in the book of Hebrews foretelling the new covenant that Christ would establish (31:31-34, Hebrews 8:6-12).

(8) God made it clear that the Jews who would continue to be blessed by God were those who were taken into exile. They were told to establish homes and families and to become blessings to their neighbors in Babylon. They were also told they would be restored to their ancestral home at the end of seventy years (25:8-13, 29:4-14).

(9) God loved his people, and did not want to move against them as he eventually did. He said if one righteous person could be found he would not punish Judah at that time (5:1-2). He also clearly stated how the evil prophesied to come upon them could be avoided if they would repent and change their life style (7:1-15).

(10) Jeremiah's feelings were torn between his love for the Jews to the point of weeping day and night on the one hand, and his desire to get away from them on the other (9:1-3).

(11) There were times when Jeremiah felt like he had taken all that he could take to the point of cursing the day of his birth (20:14-18). He was even told he could not marry or have children (16:1-9). Notwithstanding his low times, Jeremiah never gave up (20:7-13). In Lamentations 3:1-18, we see how Jeremiah felt in perhaps his time of deepest depression and once more, how he won the battle (Lamentations 3:19-26).

(12) At the end, Jeremiah was forced to accompany the Jerusalem stragglers. They had promised to follow the will of God if He would tell them clearly if they should or should not flee to Egypt. They pledged to obey whatever the Lord said (42:1-17). When God told them not to go to Egypt, they refused His word and went to Egypt (43:1-13). While in Egypt they became so alienated from God that they claimed to have been better off when they worshipped idols, than they were when they obeyed His messages through Jeremiah (44:15-19). God's response was that all the evil that had come upon them and would come yet in the future, was the result of their disobedience. That the Lord's word would be against them to do them harm was the Lord's answer spoken by Jeremiah (44:20-30).

(13) The bulk of those who fled to Egypt died there. The Jews that had been taken into captivity had the opportunity to return home after 70 years, although a great number of them chose not to. Those choosing not to return probably did so either because they had never lived in Palestine, or they had children or grandchildren who never had. The Jews who chose not to return

to the Holy Land became known as the "Diaspora" (the dispersed) and eventually included not only the Jews of the Babylonian captivity, but Jews of other wars as with the Romans, and those who for personal reasons chose not to live in the promised land. It should also be said that the Holy Spirit made His point about the futility of worshipping idols as shown by the fact that the Jews as a people never bowed again before so called gods of wood, stone, silver and gold.

(14) Contemporary nations understood that God was punishing His people because of their sinfulness (22:8-9).

(15) Some of my favorite passages in Jeremiah are: "Stand in the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls. But they said, we will not walk in it." (6:16), "I know, O Lord that a man's way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps" (10:23). "If you fall down in a land of peace, how will you do in the thicket of the Jordan" (12:5). "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (17:9). "Those who turn away on earth will be written down because they have forsaken the fountain of living water, even the Lord." (17:13). "Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?" "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the Lord (23:24). "For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope" (29:11). But they will say, "It's hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart" (18:12). "Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave orders about Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan the captain of the bodyguard, saying "Take him and look after him, and do nothing harmful to him, but rather deal with him just as he tells you" (39:11-12). "Cursed be the one who does the Lord's work negligently" (48:10). "For who will summon Me into court? And who then is the shepherd who can stand against Me? (49:19). "Behold, I am against you, O arrogant one (Babylon), declares the Lord God of hosts, for your day has come, the time when I shall punish you." (50:31). CM