

Sunday School Notes 1 September 2019: God's messenger, Jeremiah (Jer ch 1)

Some people suggest that the Old Testament shows God as harsh and judging, whereas the New Testament shows his loving side. Nothing could be further from the truth. Love isn't all about being kind. When our parents scold us or punish us, it doesn't mean they don't love us. The punishment happens because they want us to learn how to behave or what is right.

And God is the same.

God chose a group of people (the Jews) for a special job – not because they were perfect or more talented, but because they were right for the job. They were to live according to God's laws and so would be different from the other nations. Their job was to 'witness' to these nations so the others would discover what God was like.

But they got it all wrong! They didn't listen to God properly. So over the years they began to believe that they had been chosen by God because they were better than the other nations. This meant that they went around looking down on everyone else. In some ways we could say they became too big for their boots, like cheeky brats. Although God gave them a fertile homeland and helped them fight their battles, they behaved abominably (like undisciplined children) towards other nations and towards God. This is the story told in large parts of the Old Testament

God sent a whole lot of messengers to them pleading with them to listen to him because there were going to be consequences if they didn't do so. These messengers were called 'prophets'.

Now this helps us to see how the Old Testament is made up. It has history books which tell what was happening. It has poetry books written by people praising God. And it has the words of the prophets or messengers.

One of the prophets was a chap called 'Jeremiah'. The history of Jeremiah's time is told in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Kings tells the general history of the times, while Chronicles adds all kinds of extra details and lists.

So we can work out that Jeremiah was born about 650 years before Jesus when king Manasseh was on the throne. Manasseh gets pretty bad press! See 2 Chronicles 33:2 and 2 Kings 21:16. Not a very nice legacy. After he died Amon became king, but he didn't last very long.

When Amon died his son Josiah became king when he was 8 years old. We don't know how, but he knew about God and wanted to be a godly king. It seems there were no copies of God's law around, but he decided at least he could clean up God's temple. So he got the idols removed and the temple repaired. While they were doing this, the High priest discovered hidden in the broken walls a copy of God's law (Deuteronomy). This was read to the king who set about obeying God's rules. he called the people together and held big

services. Everyone seemed to be back on track. But, it was all just show on the people's part. They worshipped God because the king said so, not because they loved God.

So that's why God needed to send another messenger – Jeremiah. Jeremiah was told by God that he had been chosen to serve as a prophet. He was probably about 20 years old at the time (He refers to himself as a 'child', but that could be in comparison with the older men around him.)

God explained that he had 'formed' Jeremiah when he was in the womb. This echoes Psalm 139:13-16. God made each of us and we are perfectly made. We may think we are too fat or too thin or too ugly or too clumsy or even too stupid, but God knew what he was doing. So let's celebrate God's great plan in our lives.

God had chosen Jeremiah for his special work before he was even born. Think of that: before we were born, we like Jeremiah have been set aside for special duty. That's like being chosen as a prefect, chosen as president! We are important in God's plans. Don't let anyone ever tell you anything else. (The people often tried to tell Jeremiah he was talking nonsense, but he didn't keep quiet. He knew God had chosen him to tell the truth!)

But when Jeremiah first heard that he was to be a prophet, he didn't like the idea and he answered back – Jer 1:6. It's quite normal to get a bit scared and to want to drop out! Moses did the same thing. And these were giants of the faith. Even Jesus wept in Gethsemane and begged God not to let him suffer. God didn't get cross with any of them. He gave Jeremiah (and us) a great promise in Jer 1:8: "Don't be afraid. I shall be with you and shall rescue you." Notice that God didn't say it would always be easy to be his person! But he promised help. From that day on Jeremiah would be like a great city, like an iron pillar, like a bronze wall. See Jer 1: 18 and 19. Jeremiah had a really tough life. The priests and the rulers didn't want the people to hear his messages from God and so they set about discrediting his statements. If the people had listened, the leaders would have been recognised as false leaders.

And God gave him a special memory clue also – based on an almond tree. This was the first tree to blossom at the end of winter; the promise of spring. The word for 'almond' *shaqad* was almost exactly the same as the word for 'watching' *shogad*. So every time Jeremiah saw an almond tree, he would remember that God was watching over him and every time he used the word 'watching' he would remember how the almond tree promised spring even though winter seemed to be all around. God's help was there in the dark times.

And the promise for Jeremiah is good for us too. God watches over us, even during the dark days. We too can be strong for God because he made us and wants us to be part of his special work.