

LECTURE 6 “More Illustrated Messages”

Jeremiah 18:1 – 21:14; 24:1-10

Yellowstone Park has an abundance of an unusual evergreen trees called the Lodgepole Pine. The cones of this pine may hang on the tree for years and years, and even when they fall they don't open. These cones can only be opened when they come in contact with intense heat. But God has a reason for planning them this way. When a forest fire rages throughout parks and forests, all the trees are destroyed. At the same time, however, the heat of the fire opens the cones of the Lodgepole Pine; and these pines are often the first trees to grow in an area that has been burned by fire.

For 18 years Jeremiah had prophesied under good king Josiah before the king was shot by an arrow during a war and died. The people made Jehoahaz the king, but Pharaoh Neco deposed him and took him off to Egypt after just three months and made Jehoiakim king in his place. He would rule for eleven years while Egypt was fighting off Nebuchadnezzar and the forces of Babylon. Once Egypt was defeated, however, the troops of Babylon turned toward Jerusalem and began a lengthy siege. The final days of the Divided Kingdom were drawing to a close.

The fire of God's judgment was underway. Gaining victories, Nebuchadnezzar began to take captives to Babylon. King Jehoiakim and the prophet Daniel and his friends were among those taken in the first deportation. Jehoiachin (remember kim had a chin) succeeded to the throne for just three short months. In today's lesson, Jehoiachin and his household, and about 10,000 more of the best of the land were deported, including Ezekiel and Morcecai, the cousin of Esther, who, as we know would one day become a queen and save her people.

Then Nebuchadnezzar placed Mattaniah (Jehoachin's uncle) on the throne and changed his name to Zedekiah. He would rule eleven years and try to rebel against Babylon – unsuccessfully, as we'll find out.

The leadership changed, but the message and the messenger did not. God's plan and purpose was underway.

In last week's lesson, we saw that God spoke in pictures or illustrations. In fact, we considered that again in our lesson this week. It's a simple and obvious answer – "a picture is worth a thousand words." We're visual people . . . think of how impacted we've been by what we've seen live on television since the September 11th attack, the daily news reports of violence and bloodshed in the Middle East, and the suffering of Ebola victims

with a plague that may threaten our very shores. It's a drama of seeing horror and true tragedy (not just Hollywood stunts) with our own eyes that's had a profound effect on each of us and on our nation. As I was typing out this lesson, I looked at my computer screen and it was full of icons – pictures to tell you what to do. Our phones have multiple apps, even our road signs are full of symbols – we recognize them by shapes instead of words.

In last week's lesson, there was the visual illustration of the linen belt that became rotten and the illustration of Jeremiah's life itself. He could not marry, have a family, mourn or celebrate – his life would bear witness to the joyless future for Judah.

Another three specific illustrated messages were given to Jeremiah in today's lesson: 1) the potter's product, 2) the broken jar, and 3) the basket of figs. Already you remember what each represented because of God's vivid word pictures as you studied the Scriptures.

There was nothing unusual at the potter's house . . . a craftsman applying his trade. But spiritual insight awakened Jeremiah as he watched the potter shaping and molding the clay – he was looking at a picture of himself, and of every man, and of every nation. We are the clay. The wheel constantly turning was

bringing the clay against the potter's hand. As our life is being shaped and molded by the Great Potter, it is the circumstances of our life that He uses to shape the vessel according to His will. When a lump appears that refuses to yield to the potter's hand, he has the right to crush the clay and begin again to reshape and renew the work until the plan He had originally intended is completed. This is God's sovereignty in a simple picture. In the verses that follow, this lesson is applied to the nation of Judah.

There's a beautiful lesson here in the word "repent" as it's used in reference to God. When you and I talk about repenting, we speak in terms of changing our mind. We started out to do something, but circumstances occur that cause us to change our mind. But that's not the way the word is used concerning God here. The Hebrew used here is really the word "sigh," or "heave a sigh." It can be used either as a sigh of sorrow, or a sigh of relief. The word is used both ways here in this passage.

God says, "If I say to a nation, 'I'm going to destroy you,' or to an individual, 'I'm going to uproot you, crush you,' and I bring pressure upon you to that end . . . if you yield to it, if you conform to what the pressure is doing to you, then I will heave a sigh of relief." There is the heart of the potter, hoping that the pressure He is exerting will be enough so that He can sigh with

relief as the clay yields to His hands. But as verse 12 makes clear, in Judah's case it did not happen: Forget it, God! **each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.** And so God sighed with sorrow.

Where are you today? Are you material – the soft, pliable clay that the potter can shape, and reshape and reshape again until He is happy? Or are you like the product . . . out of the Potter's hand so long you've become hardened into a permanent shape that will no longer yield? Certainly that was Judah's problem.

Ever heard the saying, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand!"? Jeremiah could weep before God and pray for the people, and intercede for them, but even a prophet's heart can give way to the frustrations of the flesh. In fact, I think that this is one of the most instructive things in this book – to see how this mighty prophet, who had a faithful, life-long ministry, had his times of weakness and trembling and fear. Being ignored is tough, but slander cuts to the quick. It's so hard to endure. I've been the victim of it and it hurts . . . it hurts deeply, especially when you value your name and integrity. Jeremiah prays, "Lord, I don't deserve this, I've been faithful – pay them back! Sic 'em, God!" And sometimes that's all you can do . . . let God take care

of the situation. If there was any relief to be had for Jeremiah, it came from an honest prayer to an understanding God.

The second illustrated message again called for Jeremiah to return to the potter's house. This time he was to buy a clay jar, a vessel already fired in the kiln, hardened and brittle. He was to take some of the elders of the people and some of the priests out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom. In the New Testament this was called the valley of Gehenna – the garbage dump of Jerusalem. All the bodies of animals that died in the streets were left there to rot. It was there that the bodies of criminals were thrown after execution to be food for vultures – a disgusting, stinking place. In Jeremiah's day it was a place where altars were erected to the god, Molech, a fearsome, grinning idol. Inside his wide mouth was a great fire through which the people passed their living children to be burned alive. Horrible! Life is precious and the Creator of all life was abhorred with this disgusting practice of human sacrifice.

Jeremiah 19:9 says, "I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, and they will eat one another's flesh during the stress of the siege imposed on them by the enemies who seek their lives." A prophecy that literally came true as famine grew so severe during the siege of Jerusalem that the people

resorted to cannibalism and killed and ate their own children, and one another, in order to live.

God said, "Smash the jar," Jeremiah, "as a sign of how Jerusalem will be smashed in judgment." And as they watched the clay jar dashed against a rock and shatter into tiny pieces, so that it was impossible to bring it back together, the people were taught that they were dealing with a God whose love was so intense that He would not alter His purposes – even if He had to destroy and crush and break them down again. But like God's plan for the seeds of the Lodgepole Pine, His plan also included life renewed after the fire of judgment.

We can only imagine how angry the elders were who had accompanied Jeremiah to the Potsherd Gate. After all, they had endorsed the "peace messages" of the false prophets, as well as the political schemes of the civil leaders, who hoped to get help from Judah's allies. But what Jeremiah did next made them even angrier, because he went to the temple and preached the sermon again!

The chapter break for Chapter 20 should really begin at 19:14. Pashhur son of Immer, the chief officer of the temple, heard Jeremiah preaching. What before had been threats now became a reality. Pashhur had Jeremiah arrested, beaten and

put into stocks until the next day. The stocks were located at a prominent place in the temple area, in order to add shame to pain.

God, however, met with Jeremiah that night and gave him a special message and a new name for Pashhur. Instead of the name Pashhur, which means “prosperity on every side,” he would be known as Magor-Missabib, which means “terror on every side.” Pashhur’s treatment of Jeremiah would receive just recompense, for he and his family would be taken captive to Babylon and they would die there. For a Jew to be buried outside his own land was considered a judgment, because Gentile lands were considered unclean.

Perhaps the prayer of vs. 7-18 that complete chapter 20 was uttered after Jeremiah was released from the stocks and at home nursing his wounds. Or, perhaps it was uttered in the lonely dark night hours during his suffering. In either case, there are lessons to be learned from it.

Jeremiah complained to God – “I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.” That old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me” is a lie! Just the opposite, we recover the physical, but the emotional hurt is something we may forgive, but we never seem to get beyond the

forgetting. Will Rogers once said, "So live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip." That means simply, your good character and clear conscience helps you tolerate the injustice of other people's tongues.

He goes on to say, loosely paraphrased, "I'd quit, God, but when I try to hold it in, Your Word burns like a fire in my heart and I can't help but speak." It's interesting that often times, God has you living out these Scriptures before you teach them. I can't tell you how often, especially in the last several years, life has thrown Chuck and I curve after curve, that I've thought it's time to resign – I don't need this stress and pressure anymore. I tell you that in all openness and honesty. But I also tell you honestly that the fire of God's Word in my heart compels – truly compels me to "keep on keeping on." My passion is God's Word and to stoke the fire for others to love it too. It's truly in my bones and, like Jeremiah, I simply cannot hold it in.

I like what Jeremiah does next . . . he gives himself a good old-fashioned talking to in vs. 11-13 –God IS with me, they WILL fail, sing praise to the LORD! Remember who is in charge here – the Lord Almighty! One with God is a majority. When we do embrace God's sovereignty, we find that confidence increases, insecurities fade, worries decrease, and calmness replaces

striving. Strength comes from choosing to fully trust, pray, and to praise God. Our circumstances may not change, but in the process we change.

But the night wears on for Jeremiah . . . or for us our circumstances are punctuated with new stabs of pain – physical or emotional – and Satan tries to rob us of our joy. – High to low – praise God, to “curse the day I was born.” That’s a melancholy personality and I identify with that. Let’s think for a minute about how we might analyze discouragement – four things happen.

- 1) Physically we lose energy. Usually, you’re not very productive when you are discouraged. You lose inner motivation.
- 2) Emotionally, we lose touch with reality. We don’t feel like we’re loved, cared for, even known by God. We doubt if He hears our prayers.
- 3) Mentally, we lose our memory. We forget. The focus is on ourselves and off others.
- 4) Spiritually, we lose intimacy with God. And therefore we lose heart.

I’ve shared this prayer of Francois Fenelon with you before, but it’s still a good reminder:

Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may sober them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you to conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them; lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability. Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and others.

If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want for subject of conversation. They do not weigh their words, for there is nothing to be held back; neither do they seek for something to say. They talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration they say, just what they think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God.

I want to tell you something, friend to friend. Your response to failure and discouragement is your responsibility. David says it in so many words in **Psalm 103**: "O my soul, listen up. Get your eyes on the Lord . . . He forgives, He heals, He crowns me with love and compassion, He satisfies my desire for good things, He removes our sins as far as the east is from the west, He knows we are but dust, from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him." He knows what's going on in your life. Talk to yourself, listen to yourself – listen to God, reach out to help someone else. Your joy (true joy) is from God. Like the old song said, "The world didn't give it to me, and the world can't take it away." It's always too soon to quit.

Now we have the third "illustrated message" given to Jeremiah – the two baskets of figs – one basket full of very good figs, and the other full of figs so rotten they were of no use. Again . . . spiritual insight from ordinary objects.

Jehoiachin's court, a lot of fighting men, artisans and craftsmen and many others were taken off into exile in Babylon. Only the poorest were left in the land. These were the good figs that God would watch over. His plan for the exiles was to soften their hearts to know Him and one day bring them back to the land. Their descendants would be the seeds to repopulate the

land. The people who returned to the land after the Babylonian captivity were by no means perfect, but they had learned to trust the true and living God and not to worship idols. If the captivity did nothing else, it purged the Jewish people of idol worship.

2 Chronicles 36:11-12 says, "Zedekiah was 21 years old when he became king and he reigned in Jerusalem 11 years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the Lord."

While Zedekiah probably welcomed the promotion handed to him by Nebuchadnezzar and was even willing to swear an oath of allegiance, he had his own agenda. He did evil in the sight of God and tried to enlist the help of Egypt to rebel against Babylon. But like the basket of bad figs, Zedekiah and the rebels would be destroyed by sword, famine, and plague from the land.

Now 2 Chronicles 36 said that Zedekiah did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't use Jeremiah if he thought it would be to his advantage. "I'll get softhearted Jeremiah to ask God for a miracle to defeat Nebuchadnezzar . . . like He did for good King Hezekiah." Jeremiah responded with a three-fold message from God: ***

To Zedekiah: The answer was a resounding, "no" – not only that, but God Himself would help Nebuchadnezzar win and Zedekiah would die by the sword.

To the people, Jeremiah was to say, – "See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Stay in the city and die –or surrender to the Babylonians and live; escape with your life." Surrender . . . that's not a very easy thing to do, is it? Sounds like Jeremiah is preaching treason. But this is not a new message . . . for almost 40 years Jeremiah has been preaching "surrender to God," "Repent." Now the message was "surrender to God's Will." Nebuchadnezzar, God's instrument, will be victorious.

Chapter 21 closes with a message to the royal house of Judah. There are always those who are close to the throne, those who follow orders, those who can become guilty by association. This is a reminder, each individual still has a choice. God says, "administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed" or My wrath will break out and burn like fire . . . I will punish you as your deeds deserve." Even in a place full of wickedness and hypocrisy, you can be a righteous individual. You can be a good fig.

Three signs . . . the potter's clay, the broken jar, and the baskets of figs . . . all illustrations of God's sovereignty. These were tough messages for Jeremiah to deliver. But in the tough times of here and now, we have to have vision. Listen to these words of Arthur Bennett titled, "The Valley of Vision":

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
 where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
 hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy glory.

Let me learn by paradox

 that the way down is the way up,
 that to be low is to be high,
 that the broken heart is the healed heart,
 that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
 that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
 that to have nothing is to possess all,
 that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
 that to give is to receive,
 that the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from the deepest wells,
 and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;

Let me find thy light in my darkness,
thy life in my death,
thy joy in my sorrow,
thy grace in my sin,
thy riches in my poverty,
thy glory in my valley.

I would leave you with one other image this week: What do you think of when you see the sign for the railroad crossing? Something we learned as children – Stop! Look! Listen!

Stop squirming on the potter's wheel – His guiding hand is molding you into exactly the shape He desires – the image of His Son, the Lord Jesus.

Look at the shattered pieces of broken lives of those who choose to live without a relationship with the Lord Jesus. There is still time – while there is breath, there is hope. Look for every possible opportunity to share the Living Hope with the unsaved.

Listen with your ears tuned to God's Word. Good figs, bad figs – those who follow God's leading and those who lead for their own self-interest. Your responsibility is discernment. When you hear the truth, apply the truth and follow the truth.

Let's pray: Lord, Jeremiah was a man with a tender heart, a sensitive soul and a brave spirit. Like us, he struggled with the pressures of the job . . . the pressures of life. Help us to turn our spiritual awareness to see the signs of Your goodness all around us. We praise You for Your sovereign hand in our lives and for Your heart of mercy. We honor You. In the name of Jesus, Amen.