

The Compass

Week 40

OT Readings: Isaiah 62:6 – Jeremiah 9:26
NT Readings: Philippians 2:19 – Colossians 3:17

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- These final chapters of Isaiah echo the ongoing themes of the whole: Israel's waywardness, God's faithfulness to His people throughout the ages, His redemptive purpose and power, and the promise of renewal.
- Jeremiah 1 narrates Jeremiah's call to be God's person and to speak God's word to his generation. The oracles of 2:1-6:30 reveal the essential themes of the book as a whole: Judah's idolatry and unfaithfulness, God's brokenness over their adultery (from His perspective), God's pleading and warnings of coming discipline.
- The temple oracle in 7:1-34 is highly significant. It reveals the religious deception of Judah; they believe because they are keeping the externals of the law that they are right with God.¹
- Watch for the pathos and emotion of Jeremiah; he feels intensely what God feels. Perhaps more than any other OT book the heart of God is clearly on display.²
- Jeremiah is not chronological; having a picture of the historical background is needed to understand the book. See How To Read Jeremiah.³

New Testament

- Phil. 3:1-4:1 is one of those insightful autobiographical passages. Paul reveals his passion and calls his readers to follow in his footsteps (3:17).
- In Colossians, watch for the centrality and pre-eminence Paul gives to Jesus, especially 1:15-20. Paul's concern for false teaching/error present in this church underlies all he writes.⁴

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Jeremiah 4:19-22, 8:18-9:3, 9:17-19.

To read these passages and to be gripped by them requires that we open our hearts and minds to hear them on their own terms.⁵ While the words of these oracles come through the mouth of Jeremiah, they are God speaking: they are the deepest and most profound expressions of His heart.⁶ God's people are astray and they have broken His heart, they are a faithless wife and have left God for other lovers (3:6-10, 19). Yet, God pines over them, longing for a change, for them to return with all their hearts.⁷

Their resistance to Him will have dreadful consequences. Having pushed God out of their lives, the vacuum will be filled by the war machine of the Babylonians and it will be painful. It is this pain that God Himself experiences as He contemplates what will occur at the hands of the Babylonians – *He weeps, He wails, He mourns*. Yet He lives in hope! Perhaps these events will awaken His people to the truth. Perhaps they will be shaken from their religious deception and will return with all of their hearts.⁸ Perhaps.⁹

Application: "What about me? How does this apply?"

Jeremiah 7:1-34. Deception is chosen; don't be deceived by thinking otherwise! When we resist God's voice in our minds and hearts we must somehow silence the voice of conscience. What better way than by becoming religious. God had spoken to His people over the years and they had refused to respond and obey (7:23-26). Yet here is the very scary thing – they believed that they had. After all, they went to church, gave their money (offerings) and did what they were supposed to do - so they thought. And they in their own minds were assured that God would bless them, in fact, that He *owed* them a blessing because they had fulfilled their obligation.¹⁰

If you pass over section this without concern, you might well be deceived. If you too quickly dismiss the possibility, "Well, I know I'm not religious." then you had better slow down and think again. If you don't immediately stop your life and ask God, "Lord, is it me?" then you have cause for alarm. So much of our "Christianity" in America is simply self-serving selfishness. It's all about me, what I want, how I want to be served and entertained – we are

religious consumers of the most deceived sort. Am I being too hard on us? Maybe not hard enough! Honestly, do we love Him **alone**? Are we fully devoted to Him with everything? Does our lifestyle show it? What *does* our lifestyle reveal? How we use our money, our time? Are we obeying Him? In everything? With everything? Instantly, joyfully, fully – with all of our hearts and lives?¹¹

If not then it is likely that we are just religious. Read this chapter again, if you dare.

Difficult Question of the Week

Jer. 1:5-10. “Q. Did Jeremiah have a choice about his life?”

There was perhaps no more critical time in God’s relationship and dealings with His OT people than the period of Jeremiah’s life. Matters were coming to a climax; the dangers of losing His people all together to idolatry and sin were intensely real. There was a need for voices, prophetic voices, those who would speak clearly for God. God seeks for those who will respond to Him in every generation knowing that not all will do so.¹²

Did Jeremiah really have a choice? Jeremiah struggles with his call (1:6) and even finds it so difficult that he wishes he was never born!¹³ If God’s will in this matter was totally irresistible, it seems that objections wouldn’t be in play and that God would not find it necessary to reassure Jeremiah (1:7-10).¹⁴ While the initiative to call Jeremiah was clearly God’s (1:5), it seems equally clear that Jeremiah could have resisted. Perhaps a NT parallel is Paul (Gal. 1:15). While God powerfully confronts him on the Damascus road, he could have said no.¹⁵

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¹ Chapter 26 is the narrative background for the oracle of 7:1-34. This religious deception is essential to understanding why the people of Judah will be devastated by the coming discipline/judgment; they convinced themselves that they had met God’s requirements by keeping the law’s externals. Yet their hearts, reflected in their behaviors, show that they are very far away.

² When Jeremiah pleads, where his heart is pained and broken, we are hearing the voice and heart of God. Terence Fretheim notes that Jeremiah *became* the message, he *embodied* it, “*God and prophet speak with one voice.*” (Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 160. For me, *The Suffering of God* has been the single most important book in my understanding the heart of God.) Abraham Heschel writes, “The prophet hears God’s voice and feels his heart...The prophet’s inner life was not wholly his own...His emotional situation reflected the divine relation to Israel...he is a person who sees the world from the point of view of God; he sees the world through the eyes of God.” (Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, 26, 125, 138.)

³ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* do a good job with sketching the background. Consider looking at a Bible Handbook or an OT Survey; see my recommendations at

⁴ See Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 360-361.

⁵ I am indebted to Terence Fretheim (*The Suffering of God*) and Abraham Heschel (*The Prophets*) for these insights. The Bible must speak on its own terms. For some theological persuasions, God cannot suffer because of their definition of immutability. God is, of course, unchanging, but we must define Biblically what exactly this means.

⁶ This “co-joining” of God’s heart with Jeremiah’s is intensely revealed in Jer. 20:7-9. Jeremiah has found that God’s heart is so moved, broken and disturbed with the situation of His people that the intensity of this reality powerfully overcomes the man, Jeremiah. God’s pathos and frustration seize Jeremiah, rush through him, in such an intense way that he cannot contain it. The Hebrew scholar, Abraham Heschel, translates 20:7 this way, “You have seduced me and I am seduced, you have raped me and I am overcome.” Obviously, God has not violated Jeremiah, but Jeremiah *feels* as if he has been because of the power of God’s heart and passion for His people expressing itself through this human vessel.

⁷ Jer. 2:2 is fascinating. Eight hundred years have passed since God’s people “followed Him as a young bride” through the wilderness, the memory is now bittersweet. God looks back, longing that it could be so again, “pining” over them as He recalls a time when they were faithful for a moment.

⁸ Here is where understanding historical chronology helps us to understand Jeremiah’s message. The Babylonian impact on Judah plays out over a couple decades. The Babylonians take increasingly more severe actions over that time and eventually destroy Judah. In the midst of it, God hopes that such “progressive discipline” will awaken them to repentance (Jer. 26:1-6).

⁹ The “if” and “perhaps” passages of Jeremiah reveal the indeterminate nature of their future. Jer. 18:1-17 states the principle – see next week. ☺

¹⁰ Religion is essentially contractual, meaning that we do things so that we might get things in return. In contrast, the Biblical life is to live a fully surrendered relationship with God whereby we do things because we love Him without any thought for personal gain or return **because He has captured our hearts**. Where are you?

¹¹ Really, how should we respond to the God who gave everything for us? What might you rightfully withhold from Him?

¹² Jeremiah’s call is part of what I label the “Jeremiah principle.” God seeks for those who will work with Him in every generation and calls them. Notice that other prophets were called alongside Jeremiah in this time period, e.g., Zephaniah,

Ezekiel, Habakkuk as well as others unnamed. It is interesting that in the generation before Martin Luther, other voices called for reforms similar to those that Luther would eventually carry out. God was after something important in that time.

¹³ Jer. 20:14-18.

¹⁴ This is one reason that I find saying we are “instruments” in God’s hand objectionable. E.g., in Acts 9:15, Paul is to be God’s chosen “vessel” (NAU margin); “instrument” seems to me to blur the meaning of the text. Instruments are passive and we have our will in whether we will cooperate with God in our generation or not. Better to say we are “agents” of God, fully engaging His Spirit to see His purposes brought forth in our lives and time.

¹⁵ In Acts 26:19 Paul tells Agrippa that he “didn’t prove disobedient” to his call; the clear implication is that he could have.