Let us turn to the word of God, the book of the Prophet Jeremiah. This morning, we begin to look at this Old Testament prophet, his words and his deeds and his character in life---the book of Jeremiah. And this morning, we're going to study the first three verses.

During these studies, I will be switching from the Revised Standard Version to the Living Bible from time to time where a passage is a bit heavy in a traditional translation. But those will be the two translations I'll use. If you have either of them, you bring it, but if you have another, then I'm sure you'll be able to follow.

**First three verses of the book of Jeremiah**: *"The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, King of Judah in the 13th year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, King of Judah, and until the end of the 11th year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, King of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month."*

When I first read that, I thought we can skip over that fairly quickly; and then I'm going to find, I'm afraid, that it's going to be a real problem getting just the understanding of those three verses into the time at our disposal---but we shall try.

Now, the book of Jeremiah is not the most frequently read part of holy scripture. Some people don't read it because it's a big book. There are 52 chapters. If you studied a chapter a week, you'd take a whole year to get through it. And then there are others who find it a bit of a boring book because there's quite a lot of repetition in it. And there are still others who find it a baffling book because it's an anthology---a collection of prophecies and various other things. And it's just been put together in an apparently haphazard way so that the prophecies are not even in chronological order---they don't follow one another. And so, it's not the easiest book to study. And I hope you're not going to get bored or baffled with the studies we're going to have in it.

***Three Reasons to Study Jeremiah***

May I give you two reasons why I've chosen the book of Jeremiah? Three reasons. ***FIRST***, we have not been through it before. I have not been through it before. I've never taken a church through this book. Shame on me, but I haven't. ***SECOND***, a general reason. Every scripture inspired of God is profitable and able to make us wise. And since Christians only have one book to study, we should dig into every part of it so that we know it all.

I remember a converted communist coming to our young people's fellowship way back in... Oh, 28 years ago in Newcastle. He was converted through seeing the film 'Quo Vadis' because until he saw that film, he'd never known that anybody else would die for their faith except communists. And this converted him. He came to our fellowship, and he asked all our young people, "How many of you have read the Bible right through?" And there were a number who were embarrassed to say they had never done so. And he said, "That's amazing." He said, "I would never dare to call myself a communist if I'd never read 'Das Capital' right through," which was quite a challenge to our young people. We've only got one book to master as Christians, so we should study every part of it.

But ***(THIRD)*** the particular reason why I've chosen Jeremiah, it's been a growing burden in my heart for about four months now, is this: There is no more relevant part of God's word to our national situation than the book of Jeremiah. You will see this as we introduce and give you some of the background. You'll see that he was God's man for a nation going to pieces. He was God's man for a nation declining from one of the first powers to a very third rate power, a nation losing its empire, losing its territory, a nation getting involved in common markets and all sorts of relationships with other nations to try and survive by joining larger power units---a nation that was doing exactly what ours is doing and that was becoming weak in its external and political relationships because it was becoming weak, morally and spiritually inside. And as we go through this prophecy, you will think you're reading the Sunday newspapers. It is the most relevant part of God's word.

There are enough reasons, I think, for reading it. FIRST, that we've never done so. SECOND, that every part of scripture ought to be known backwards by every Christian. And THRDLY, because this is perhaps one of the most relevant parts of scripture for our day and our scene.

Now, one of the proofs when we have chosen parts of the Bible that are relevant to contemporary events is that you tend to bring me newspaper cutting after newspaper cutting while we're studying Jeremiah. I'm going to ask you to continue to do that because it means that you're taking the word of God and then you're picking up your paper the next morning and you're relating God's eternal word with man's word tomorrow. And you can see how it all fits. And I think you'll be doing this all along, and you'll be telling me, "Isn't that amazing? We studied that on Sunday, and look what's in the papers on Wednesday."

Now, I'm going to expound just ***the first three verses***; and at first sight, what on earth is there for us? Well, let's see. I'm going to take phrase after phrase from these first three verses and look at them. And I'm not going to try and squeeze them dry, and I'm not trying to press a meaning out of them; but, oh, it's so exciting when you get right into God's word, into scripture.

1. ***First Phrase: "To whom the word of the Lord came."***

Here's the ***FIRST*** phrase I want to take out: ***"To whom the word of the Lord came."*** Now, most people believe in God. According to the television Gallup poll, 65% of the British people still believe in God. Many people talk to God, especially when they're in trouble. But the privilege we have as the people of God is that we have a God who ***TALKS*** to us. That's the difference. Most people in the world have believed in God, most people in the world say prayers, but to have a God who talks, that is exciting.

And yet, I'm not sure whether it's good news or bad news. There are times when one would prefer to have a God who would just listen and who wouldn't speak. You see, it's good news that God will talk, in the sense that you can relate to someone who will talk to you. You can believe in their existence before they talk to you, but you can't relate to them unless they're willing to talk and make a two-way conversation and a two-way relationship. And if God sat up in there in heaven and we just had to believe in Him and talk to Him, but we never got any response---we never heard anything, we never had Him talk to us---we could never say we are related to God. You could say, "I believe in His existence. I say my prayers." And most people in England seem to claim that kind of position. But when you can say, "God has spoken to me," it's exciting.

But I've said I'm not sure whether it's good news or bad news. It depends on what He's going to say, doesn't it? And if God is a God who talks, He's a God who will speak to us from what He thinks. He will not just say to us what we want Him to say. That is the difficulty, and that's the bad news. If God is going to speak His mind, HIS mind may be not what MY mind is. HIS ways and thoughts are higher than MINE and maybe even contrary to mine. And I'm not always sure that I want Him to speak---especially if he's going to rebuke me or criticize me or say something that will hurt.

And most of the Bible is unwelcome news. Did you realize that? If you don't believe me, go through your Bible and just put a little cross on every page that contains words that are not congenial to human nature. You will be staggered. Most of this book is bad news to fallen human nature.

From the very beginning of the Old Testament, what's one of the first thing God says? *"You shall not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and of evil. The day you eat, you die."* Now, is that good news? Is that a nice thing to hear? When all of us have nibbled at that fruit in one way or another and tried both good and evil so that we can have some personal knowledge of both, and it's left us ashamed and guilty and not fit to meet God. And you turn through the pages of the Old Testament, the very last words of the Old Testament are these: *"Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."* Not very nice. Wish God hadn't said that.

And you start the New Testament and you're not into it very long before you find this, God is saying to a young couple, *"You shall call his name Jesus because he shall save his people from their sins,"* not from their fears or their doubts or their problems or their perplexities, but *'from their sin'*. That's the last thing we want to be saved from. We want to be saved from so many other things. And then you come to the Sermon on the Mount; and if you can read that through without feeling uncomfortable, you're a better man than I am.

And we go through to the final book of the New Testament, and the great part of the book of Revelation is unwelcome. It's about plagues and disasters and horrors, and it's a part we don't like to read. What do we do? We pick out all the bits. We have a promise box made up to look like a nice box of chocolates, and we've got some nice little promises inside you can pick out with tweezers and read. Or else we read this bit and that bit, which are nice. We love the 23rd Psalm. Even unbelievers love that. But do they read the other Psalms in front of it and behind it? Never.

Now, you look at the edge of your Bible, look at the pages and see where the dirty pages are. Have you ever done that? You can do it now if you don't let the person next door to you see what you're doing. Just have it glance down. See how dirty the edge of the pages of Jeremiah are. See if the gold leaf's worn off there.

And if you read Jeremiah, one of the things about Jeremiah is that God says so many things in this book that people have taken His very name, and they say of someone who's depressing, "Oh, don't be a 'Jeremiah'." It's almost as much a proverb as the saying, "A Job's comforter." A 'Jeremiah' is a doom and gloom man, and so we don't like reading it. We don't want to listen to what God has to say, because God is saying you carry on the way you are as a nation, and it is inevitable that your nation cracks up.

And I have found when I've traveled overseas that overseas people are more aware of the possibility of catastrophe in Britain than we are here. In Canada, I've found person after person---now, I know they've got it from the papers, and the papers pick on the worst and sometimes exaggerate---but the concern I found in Canada for Britain was far greater than anything I find here. They said, "What is happening to you? Why is it that your people will fight for your country and die for it, but won't work for it?" That's the question I got asked. And they could see that we were cracking up as a nation. And they trembled for us---people had left this country years ago or whose grandparents had gone out.

Now, that's the kind of thing we're going to get in Jeremiah. But it's not all doom and gloom. God never gives his word in an unbalanced way. And just as in any bed of nettles, very near it you'll find a dock leaf to rub into the sting.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, you'll find little glimpses of hope, little gleams of dawn. Every so often, the very fact that God is still speaking in this disastrous situation is hope, because if it were finished entirely, God would just wash His hands of it and would remain silent and let it happen. The fact that Isaiah went on prophesying until the captivity... And it took him over 40 years, and he went on right to the day of disaster speaking. Why should He go on speaking? Why should God go on speaking? The answer is God never gives up. God is going to go on speaking and saying, "I still warn you; I still warn you till the day it happens, so that if just one listened to my word and did something about it, then that would gladden my heart."

We're going to read Jeremiah. And God is speaking. And we've got a God who talks. It's not always nice to listen to what He says. It'd be much nicer to jump through Jeremiah and say, "I'm going to preach a series of sermons on texts from Jeremiah," and then I could pick all the nice bits out and send you away comforted. But no, we're going to go through Jeremiah. I've got to go through it; you've got to go through it. But it's when you've been knocked down and when you've been humbled, that God can tenderly exalt and lift.

We're going to go through. *"The word of the Lord came,"* and that's better than no word at all. In fact, there had been 70 years of silence; and now God was talking again. There are periods in our life like that when the heavens seem like brass, and we just don't hear anything; and then God begins to speak again. It's not always a comfortable word, but wouldn't you rather have God saying anything to you than not speaking at all? Wouldn't you rather have God rebuking you than saying nothing? It means He still loves, and He still cares, and He's still concerned.

1. ***The Second Phrase: "The words of Jeremiah."***

Now, the ***SECOND*** thing---the phrase---I want to emphasize now is the first phrase in verse one, ***"The words of Jeremiah."*** Now, here's the miracle and the mystery of inspiration. *“The word of the Lord.”* *“The words of Jeremiah.”* which is it? And the answer is ***BOTH***. And don't ask me to explain how. The Bible is a miracle in itself. It is the words of 'Jeremiah' and 'Isaiah' and 'Paul' and 'John'; but at the same time, it's *'the word of the Lord'*. And if you treat it as either, you mistake the book.

There are those scholars and others who read the Bible purely as a HUMAN book, as the words of Jeremiah and so on; and therefore, as a fallible human book full of contradictions and mistakes purely to be studied as history or literature by the same token as you study any other book. That is a mistake. Equally, there are Christians who treat this book as purely the word of the LORD as if the men were simply machines---as if God gave His word through typewriter, and there is no trace of any human character in these books. But when you read them, you find that Jeremiah's personality comes through, Paul's grammar comes through, John's heart of love comes through, and so there are the TWO.

Now, it isn't as if this bit is the word of the Lord, and then we get a bit of human word---as if they're all mixed up like that, and you have to ask the scholar, "Now, which came from God, and which came from Jeremiah? Which bit can we trust, and which bit can't we?" All of it is BOTH. That is the mystery of inspiration; that God can take a human personality and pass his truth through that personality without denying that personality, using that person---his temperament, his experience---to shape, using that person's very grammar. Paul's grammar, it comes very much unstuck at times. It flows so much like a rapid in a river, that sometimes he starts a sentence, and you get to the end of it and you realize there's no primary clause and no main verb. He just stops and starts again. He's just so full. It's pouring out like a torrent. And God can use that so that the result is the infallible word of the Lord. Now, don't ask me to explain it, just hold both things together. When you're reading the book of Jeremiah, you need to get both the human situation, the human background, the human feelings, the human prophet, and you need to remember that the result of what has come through that human situation is God's infallible word to us.

***Jeremiah’s Words Contain Pictures***

Now, that's all there in the first three verses. *“The word of the Lord came.” “The words of Jeremiah.”* And we're reading both. Now, I want to pick out TWO CHARACTERISTICS of the words of Jeremiah, which are not unique but different in degree from every other prophet. FIRST of all, he's a man who uniquely speaks in ***PICTURES***. Now, you know a man who speaks in pictures will always be an effective speaker because people will say when they listen, "Oh, I see, I see." And do you know when I just mentioned nettles and dock leaves, I saw your faces say, "I see." A little picture came into your mind. You remembered when you'd rubbed a dock leaf into your nettled finger. Do you remember? You saw. Now, Jeremiah is doing this the whole time, pictures; and therefore, some of the things he says you'll never forget, because you see them. Listen. *"Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leper his spots? Then you can begin to do good who are used to doing evil."* Now then, doesn't that really hit you? What a picture. Think of a leper trying to rub his spots off, scratching and scratching and scratching. They won't go. An Ethiopian, if you've ever seen an Ethiopian, it's the most beautiful skin in the world. It's golden, golden. The Ethiopian's skin is just perfect. It's what we all hope to have when we come back from holiday. If you want it, don't go to the West Scotland, by the way. And you come back, and you just want to be golden all through the winter. Well, you'll have to be born in Ethiopia. Now, can an Ethiopian change that? No, he can't. He can neither become black nor white. He's fixed.

And so, in vivid pictures, Jeremiah says, *"You imagine an Ethiopian trying to change the color of his skin. You imagine a leper trying to scratch his spots off. Then if they can do that, you can change from being bad people to being good people."* And that's the death nail of all human reformation. It's saying you'll never make yourself good. God needs to do something radical with you. You need to have a surgical operation. You need to be 'born again', created anew.

There are many other pictures that come. May I just read a list of some of them, which I found in a book? "A girl and her ornaments, a man in his waist cloth; thus, Jeremiah figures what ought to be the clinging relations between Israel and God. The stunted desert shrub in contrast to the riverside oaks, the incomparable olive, the dropped sheaf, and even the dung upon the fields; the vulture, the stalk, the crane and the swift; the lion, wolf and spotted leopard coming up from the desert or the jungles of Jordan; the henning stallions and the heifer in heat; the black Ethiopian---already familiar in the streets of Jerusalem; the potter and his wheel, the shepherd, plowman and vine dresser; the driver with his ox's yolk upon his shoulders, the harlot by the wayside, the light in the home, the sound of the hand mill---all everyday objects of his people's sight and hearing as they heard, plowed, sewed, reaped, or went to market in the city." That's Jeremiah.

And you'll find that sometimes, he uses these pictures of speech to get a point across. *"As the birds migrate back to the same nest, why don't my people find their way back to God?"* Isn't it vivid? And sometimes, God uses pictures to speak to Jeremiah and says, *"Jeremiah, what do you see?"* And he says, *"I see an almond tree." "Jeremiah, what do you see?" "I see a boiling cauldron tipping over."* What do you see?

And sometimes, when the people wouldn't listen to Jeremiah with their ears, what he used to do was give them a picture. He would take a jar and he'd break it; he would take a stone and he'd bury it; he would take his old dirty underwear and leave it under a rock until it was full of maggot; and then he'd bring it out and say, *"That's what you're like. You were once as close to God as my underwear is to me, but this is what's happened to you."* And they saw where they wouldn't hear. It's very vivid. It's picture language. And I hope you are, in a sense, in the deeper sense, enjoy the clear pictures that God gives through Jeremiah.

But Jeremiah had the gifts of observation and imagination, which our Lord Jesus had. His teaching also was full of pictures from everyday life. Now, the problem we have with this is that the culture and the country and the background from which all these pictures are taken is the Middle East, not southwest England. And therefore, we have to translate these into pictures of today, or we have to try and get back into that culture. And I'll try and help you to do that. But picture language was part of Jeremiah's words. The word of the Lord came through the words of Jeremiah, so it came in picture language.

***Jeremiah’s Words Contain Poetry***

Now, the ***SECOND*** thing about Jeremiah, as far as his words are concerned, is this: Jeremiah is the finest ***POET*** among all the prophets. Lyrical---he would've been a great songwriter. His songs would have been top of the charts again and again. He has taken the folk song style, and most of his prophecies are in verse. Now, this doesn't come out in the living Bible or even in the authorized, I think, but in the Revised Standard Version, you'll find that wherever his words are in poetry, that the lines are broken---there are more spaces between, they're not just in straight lines of prose. And you'll find that most of it is in poetry, or much of the prophecy. It's like going down a river; sometimes it's running flat and smooth in prose; and then you come to a cataract, and you are rushing down and the white water's all around you---rather like the recent expedition down the Zaire River to commemorate Stanley's heroic trip down that river 100 years ago. You go along in prose, and then suddenly you're tumbling down a cataract. The rapids--the poetry--- comes out.

Now, I'd better say a little about Hebrew poetry just so that you understand a little about it. It's impossible to translate into English. That's the problem. And therefore, we are again at a disadvantage. Just as the pictures of Jeremiah come from a bygone day, the poems are also in a strange rhythm and language to us. Hebrew poetry did not rhyme. Now, most English poetry does (or it did until recently) and so we are used to RHYME. Now, Hebrew poetry depends not upon rhyme, but upon RHYTHM---the beat, the sense of stress, accent.

Can I give you that silly little poem I quoted the other day, I think, that will help you to realize it?

*There was a young lady of Deal*

*Who was stung on the nose by a wasp.*

*When asked if it hurt, she replied,*

*"No, it doesn't,*

*But I'm jolly glad it wasn't a hornet."*

Now, there is a perfect example rhythm without rhyme. You expected rhyme, but you didn't get it. But you got the rhythm, did you? That's a limerick rhythm but not a rhyme. Now, Hebrew poetry is like that.

Now, again, the writer of which I read earlier has tried to get into English some of the poetry. And I think you might just get some of the stress. It's a valiant attempt. It doesn't quite come off, but it's a valiant attempt. I don't think you could get nearer in English. Listen.

*"The troth of thy youth, I remember*

*Thy love as a bride,*

*They follow of me through the desert,*

*The land unsewn.*

*Holy to the Lord was Israel,*

*Of his income the firstling.*

*All that would eat of it stood guilty,*

*Evil came on them."*

Or again,

*"Can a maiden forget her adorning*

 *Or her girdle the bride,*

*Yet me have my people forgotten days*

 *Without number.*

*How fine has thou fashioned thy ways*

 *To seek after love."*

Or again,

"*From the noise of the horse and the bowman,*

 *All the land is in flight,*

*They are into the caves, huddle in thickets,*

*And are up on the craigs.*

*Every turn of its focus forsaken*

*With none to inhabit."*

You're beginning to get it. There's that da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da. And that is characteristic. It may vary in number of beats. But, I want you to notice something else now. There's not only a rhythm of SOUND, there's a rhythm of SENSE. And this is the key to Hebrew poetry: a rhythm of sense. It's nearly all what's called PARALLELISM, whereby you say a thing twice. And the second line, which is usually shorter than the first, repeats the thought of the first line. Did you notice this? "Can a maiden forget her adorning or her girdle, the bride?" You got it? Same thought repeated in different words. Sometimes the second line simply repeats the first line in different words; sometimes it says something opposite to the first line; sometimes it adds something to the first line---but there's a very definite two line all the way through. And if you study the Psalms, you'll find they're nearly all in this rhythm. "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da. And so you'll find it running all the way through.

Now, I'm afraid we're going to miss a lot of this poetry. But why do you think that God gave words in pictures and in poems, and chose a man with a vivid imagination and with a great poetic gift? Why do you think he did that? I'll tell you; because he wanted his word to be remembered. And you will remember PICTURES and POEMS better than you will remember any prose.

If a preacher gives an illustration---paints a picture in your mind--- that's what will stick. Or if you quote a little poem, that's what will stick. If I just quoted again the poem,

*"How odd of God*

*To choose the Jews,*

*But odder still*

*For those who choose*

 *The Jewish God*

 *And scorn the Jews,"*

then I think you'll go home, and you'll say, "Now, what was that? He was saying this morning? 'How odd of God.'" And you'll get it. And so, this is why God wanted his word to be remembered until it was applied; and so he put it in pictures and in poems. And the words of Jeremiah are just full of both.

And of course, He also gave us one other gift. He didn't just give us a JEREMIAH who could SPEAK, He gave us a man called BARAK who could WRITE. Jeremiah was a prophet with a secretary and a man called Barak who wrote down the poems---who wrote down some of the biography of Jeremiah, which is important to have. And the poor man, he just finished writing down the first lot when the king took a pen knife and sliced it into bits and threw it on the fire bit by bit as he read it; and so, he had to write it all out again. But out of revenge, he wrote even more fully, and he wrote even more down, and the king had a bigger book to cope with. And so, we've got the book of Jeremiah, the words of Jeremiah written down by Barak.

1. ***Third Phrase: "Son of Hilkiah of the priest."***

Now, the ***THIRD*** phrase I want to look at... You're getting bored. Hope not. Put your hand up when you are. The next phrase, ***"Son of Hilkiah of the priest."*** It's at this stage that you have to begin to dig and get back into the man's **UPBRINGING**. I'm sure you know that Jeremiah was called to begin his ministry when he was still in his teens (his late teens), a shy, diffident youth full of excuses. We'll study that next Sunday morning. The most unlikely man (young man) to challenge not only one nation, but as God said to him, *"All the nations. I've set you over all the nations. Your word will have international effect."* And he chose this shy, diffident boy.

Why did he choose THIS boy? God knows what he's doing. He doesn't choose haphazardly. He chooses a man for what God can see in him and for what God can put into him---for what is already there and for what God knows He can add. And he often chooses someone because of their background. And there's no doubt that you can read a lot into the background. And when you get into it, it's fascinating. He's living in a little village about an hour's walk, three to four miles northeast of Jerusalem, and just off the beaten track, so no tourist ever goes there today. When I started this study, I thought I must go next time---just see the little village. It's now the Arab Village of ANATA, which was then Anathoth. And he lived just an hour's walk away. And he was of the priests.

Now, why was he living way over there? Why wasn't he living near Jerusalem? Why weren't they near enough to the Temple for the whole family to be involved as priests? The answer is that Jeremiah was of a priestly family that had been EXCOMMUNICATED--- that had been turned out of priestly service. Oh, they had a long family tree that went back to the days of Moses, and even beyond; and in that family tree was the great priest, Eli of Shiloh. You remember Eli in Samuel? And then coming a bit further down, there was a priest called Abiathar, whom Solomon, for various reasons, had turned out of the temple and said, "You may be a priest but you're not going to worship or lead the worship in my Temple anymore; and none of your line will." And he banished them to a little village called Anathoth four miles away. And there this family lived knowing they were called of God, that they had the right to serve God in his Temple and yet shut off from it. Now, that's the background.

And here was a devout family keeping their relationship to God, unable to exercise their ministry with all the frustration that that included. A devout home, because by this time people had stopped choosing religious names for their children. In the nation at large, when a boy or girl was born, they usually chose a name they liked for the sound of it, they didn't choose a name that tried to relate that child to God. But in many of the names of the Bible, you get the thought that the parents wanted their child in some way to be used by God.

So, Hilkiah, his father, that word (Hilkiah) means *'God is my portion'*, or *'God is all I want'*. What a lovely name to call your baby; *'God is all I want'*. That baby would have a name to live with for the rest of his life*. 'God is all I want'*. Can you imagine living with that name when God was not all you wanted?

Lacks of Poplar, the famous Methodist minister of many years ago was one day christening a baby, and he asked the parents, "Name this child," and the parents said, "Genius." And he said, "Pardon?" And they said, "Genius." He said, "You mean a brilliant person?" "Yes." "Oh, don't saddle the child with that," he whispered. "That's an awful name to give a child. What will he do at school with it?" They said, "Call him genius." And the cockney father said, "We want to give him something to live up to," so they call him 'Genius'.

Now, that was simple biblical practice, but it was symptomatic of the nation's decline that no longer did people want to give their children names that might link them to God, or remind them of God. But Hilkiah means *'God is my portion'*, and Jeremiah means *'God hurls'*, 'God *fights', 'God throws'*. I wonder if they realized when they used such a name that this young man was going to throw God's word at a whole nation and at a whole world.

But they called him that---a devout home. It was a home in which he obviously knew his Bible, because in the earliest prophecies he gave, there are constant references to the 10 commandments, to the prophets that had preceded him. A devout home but frustrated because they could not minister to the Lord.

Now, that's the situation. And it prepared Jeremiah, because this was to be his ministry. He was to be a prophet of God, and yet he was constantly to be refused a hearing. He was to be imprisoned, beaten, ridiculed, marked. And so, he wasn't going to be welcomed in his ministry; and so he was brought up in a background of people who were called of God to minister, and were not allowed to, that he might be able to cope with the frustration of later years. Isn't it fascinating? Son of Hilkiah of the priests.

1. ***Fourth Phrase: "In Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin."***

Let's move on. The ***FOURTH*** phrase. ***"In Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin."*** Now, I wish I had thought of having the projector this morning. I'd like to draw a little map, but I think you know the map of the Middle East, don't you? Here's the river Jordan, Sea of Galilee, River Jordan, Dead Sea. Here's the coast, comes down. There's a little bump with Mount Carmel; then it goes right down to Egypt and the Nile. In between the coast and the river is the holy land of Judea. And it consists, in an oversimplified way, of a line of hills running up and down north and south between the river and the coast, nearer the river than the coast.

And so, now let's see a cross section. Here's the line of hills. And near the top of the line of hills, Jerusalem---just a little down on the west side, which is the green side, which is the side the rain comes because it comes from the Mediterranean. On the dry side---the wilderness, the desert, barren rocks right down to the river, which is way below sea level, the Jordan, the Dead Sea.

The village of Anathoth is right on the ridge. It's between town and country, it's between green fields and desert. And in the far distance over the great gulf, there was a beautiful green land where the hills came up again, and a little rain came from the west---could fall again---and there you had the meadows and pastures of Gilead.

And Jeremiah would look over that barren desert to the green hills of Gilead, and he'd say, *"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there nothing sweet and beautiful to help us there? No medicine there, no herbs there to cure our complaint?"* Do you see how vividly it comes?

And so, all through the book, you get this sense of him being between the fertility and the barrenness, between the grass and the sand, and living in those two places, he knew that he lived between the two conditions in which the people could live. They could either live with the ***BLESSING*** of rain and fertility and food or they could live in the ***BARRENNESS*** of the desert.

And the way God could do it would be this: If he switched the wind from the west to the east, it came off the desert; and then the wilderness got no rain, and the Western slopes got no rain and famine came. Water was scarce. There's a vivid description again, if I can find it, of this condition. Listen*. "Jerusalem's cry has gone up. Judah is mourning. The gates there all faint in black grief to the ground. Her nobles sent menials for water; they came to the pits. Water found none and returned, empty their vessels. Abashed and confounded, they cover their heads. The tillers of ground are dismayed, for no rain hath been. And abash to the plum, and they cover their heads. The hind on the moor calves and abandons, for the grass has not come. On the bare heights stand the wild asses, gasping for air with blazon eyes, for herb there is none."* Did you get a picture? He'd always seen that on the east side, now he saw it on the west.

Do you know, as you looked at the parched grass this summer---as you see the brown grass, as you see the hay crop fail, as we drove up to Scotland and saw cattle being fed with hay in August---do you realize the implication of this? That's what Jeremiah was seeing. And he realized that it's in the hand of God to ***GIVE*** and ***WITHHOLD***. It's within the hand of God to bring drought and to send rain. And he learned this from having been born in Anathoth, where he'd seen plenty on one hand and barrenness on the other. And Anathoth was a perfect background.

But Anathoth was not only the border between east and west, it was a political border between north and south; and this too brought up Jeremiah to see. The political boundary was this: In the south below the line at Anathoth where two tribes, the big one called Judah, from which we get the word Jew, and a little one called Benjamin to the north, which was right up against this border. North of the border were the 10 tribes of the rest of the people.

But by Jeremiah's day, those 10 tribes had been lost. They'd ceased to be; for after Solomon---many years before---there'd been a civil war, there'd been a split north and south, two in the south, 10 in the north. And it was the 10 in the north that went to pieces first, and they collapsed. They were invaded. The Assyrians took them away. And they came right down as far as Anathoth and just stopped there.

And so, as the boy Jeremiah stood in the village street, if he looked north, he looked into a land that was barren of his people---only a few hiding in the hills maybe---occupied by enemies, its cities lying in ruin. And he knew from reading the prophet Isaiah that it was entirely their fault.

He looked south and he saw the beautiful city of Jerusalem still standing, but he saw in its streets the very same moral and spiritual collapse which had led Samaria to collapse. And living in Anathoth, he looked naturally to the desert and the fields, and he looked politically to the occupied and the south. It was as if he lived on the border between Vichy and Free France, or between North and South Vietnam. And he had seen what had happened in the north, and he knew that it could so easily happen in the south. And the boy was brought up living on the border of those two countries. Are you getting the feel now?

And all through his little head as he grew up were thoughts and questions: "Why did those 10 tribes lose their land? Why were they taken away? Daddy, can you tell me why? Why are these hills so barren? Why are these so green? Daddy, why?"

And you can imagine him drinking all this in until one day when he was about 20 years of age, God said, "Jeremiah, I want you." God knew what He was doing. In fact, next week we'll see that while Jeremiah was still a bulge in his mother's tummy, God was preparing him. That's what God says. "I was getting you ready. I had set my hand on you. I was predestining you to this."

And poor Jeremiah was a man who had to wrestle with the problem of predestination. He was trapped. There were times when he wished he'd never been born. There were times when he cursed the day he was born. There were times when he said, "God, why have you done this to me? If I try not to speak of you anymore, there's a hidden fire in my bones. I'm weary, and I can't contain it. Why did you do this to me?" But when God calls, you've no option.

And any preacher or teacher or prophet of God will tell you this. If God has called, you have no choice. Many ministers would leave the ministry tomorrow if they had any choice about it, but they can't. Why not? Because they remember a day when God said, "You." They have no choice. And that's what happened to Jeremiah, so God prepared this boy even before he knew. Then one day, he told him, "You are just the man I want."

1. ***Fifth Phrase: "In the days of Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah."***

Well, still moving on. Sorry, I have two more phrases to pick up. Do you mind? Let's take the ***NEXT***. ***"In the days of Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah."***Now, I don't expect that excites you; any unless you've read the Book of Kings lately and you see how the Bible hangs together, you'll never understand that unless you read the Book of Kings and Chronicles. So, there's some more homework for you.

During the weeks we're studying Jeremiah, will you read the Book of KINGS, the relevant part? Will you read the book of CHRONICLES, the relevant part? Will you read the whole of JEREMIAH again and again until you're with me all the way? And then you'll understand the drama.

Now, I never liked history at school. I hated it, and in fact, thought it was the most boring subject---and it still can be. But the important thing is that when God speaks, He always speaks in time and in space at a particular PERIOD, at a particular PLACE. And we've got to get back into that time and into that space, understand what He was saying before we can extract the principles and apply them to today. We're going to have to do a bit of history. And as I read these three names---***JOSIAH, JEHOIAKIM, ZEDEKIAH***---they begin to take flesh and blood. They're real people.

Funny enough, you know, he actually lived in the days of five Kings---or even six---but he doesn't mention three of them. He was born in the days of MANASSEH. And I'll tell you a little about him. While he was in his teens, the king was... No, it was while he was even younger. While he was a boy, the king was Ammon. And then when he was called of God to be a prophet, Josiah was king. Then there was another whose name is not mentioned here, man called JEHOAHAZ. And he only reigned for three months, and then he was gone. Then came the second man, JEHOIAKIM, who managed 11 years. Then another man, Jehoiakim, who managed three months. And then finally, ZEDEKIAH, who was reigning for another 11 years again. So that the two kings who reigned for three months are not mentioned, and the two kings of his boyhood are not mentioned... because he didn't prophesize during their reigns.

But let me just give you a very quick thumbnail sketch. MANASSEH, that name should make you shudder. It was that man who corrupted the nation, and he was on the throne when little Jeremiah was born. And that man introduced political intrigue, moral corruption, spiritual pluralism...until there were all kinds of things happening in the villages and streets of Jerusalem. Manasseh...it was in his day that they began to take little children and burn them alive to God. That's what was happening. And indeed, had Jeremiah not been born in a family out of town, he might well have ended his life as a human sacrifice.

But Manasseh died and Ammon came on the throne; and he was overthrown. And so, an eight-year-old boy called Josiah came to the throne. And Jeremiah was eight years old when Josiah was eight and came to the throne. These two boys grew up together. And Josiah was a good man, a good boy at first. And as Josiah came to his teens, he said, "It's time we spring clean the Temple. It's in a terrible state. Let's get it put right." And they spring clean the Temple, and while they did, they found in an old bricked-up cupboard a copy of the Law of Moses. Now, such was the state of the nation that it hadn't been read for years. It's as if somebody's spring cleaning came across an old family bible which they'd received at their wedding and had never looked at. And they read it, and Josiah said, "Unless we put things right and spring clean the nation, were finished." And he began to try and reform the nation, but he did it the wrong way. He did it in sincerity; but being the king, he ORDERED people to be good. And you can't change human nature by act of parliament.

And Jeremiah, who spoke very highly of Josiah, never worked with him because Jeremiah could see that you can make all the new laws you like; you can get the parliament to try and tell everybody they must observe Sunday and all the rest; you haven't changed the situation. And so, Jeremiah says in his prophecy, "Josiah's reform has not worked. You can't change the situation by act of parliament." And I want you to get this message. It's too easy for us to blame the government for the state of the nation, and to say that if they made the proper laws, we'd put the situation right. Don't you believe it!!

Jeremiah's word is more relevant. Josiah's reform was a failure in the long term. And Jeremiah carried on; because after Josiah went, then you had these tumble-down kings---especially the two he mentioned: Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. And during their time, they were rushing around joining this common market and that. They were rushing around trying to save the nation by getting united to stronger nations. And God's word was, "Why don't you come to ME? Your greatness came from ME, your power came from ME. I made you a stable power among the nations. I wanted to use you among the nations. Why didn't you come back to ME? Why'd you run to these other nations?"

It was that, partly, that led me not to vote for going into the Common Market, frankly, because I was indifferent to it in the sense that I don't believe the salvation of Britain lies there---and we are already discovering that. Seems to me sheer hypocrisy to join a Common Market and then cry out, "Buy British." It's ludicrous, and it just underlines that our salvation lies elsewhere. And Jeremiah had to say this. And Jehoiakim took the nation lower down; and Zedekiah took it lower down still. And he was just a puppet instead of a king.

During Jeremiah's time, there were ***three battles***, which were decisive. The battle of ***MEGIDDO***, which was between Egypt and Judah, and in which the young boy King Josiah died. Then the battle of ***CARCHEMISH*** between Babylon and Egypt, in which Babylon won. And finally, the battle of ***JERUSALEM*** between Babylon and Judah, and Babylon won. Or to put it in a word---if you forget the details---from being a major nation, Israel was now a shuttlecock between great powers struggling for supremacy, backing the wrong one each time, and being swallowed up in the whole boiling cauldron of political affairs. I believe that is exactly what is happening to Britain at this moment. Jeremiah, speak to us!

1. ***Sixth Phrase: "Until the captivity,"***

***FINALLY***, let me take the last phrase, ***"Until the captivity,".****.."Until the captivity."* Jeremiah was at times the only one that believed that disaster would come. Everybody else said, "It'll turn out all right." And this is the typical British attitude. "We'll muddle through. We'll get by. It'll turn out. We'll have a bad time for a year, and then things will pick up and we'll be all right." That's what they said in Jeremiah's day. And Jeremiah had to say, "You will never again be what you were. You can't pick yourselves up any more than the leopard can change his spots."

And he had the lonely task of preaching doom and gloom when people didn't want to know, they wanted prophets who'd cheer them up. They wanted people with good news. They wanted people to say, "Things aren't as bad as they seem." That's what they wanted. And so, while Jeremiah preached, the politicians tried to paint it as 'not so bad'.

And that's the situation. Isn't it real? Isn't it relevant? And I think the thing that strikes me is that Jeremiah had to bear a tragic pain in his heart. He had to watch his own nation go down and down. And I've had that sense increasingly over the last few months. Have you? I've had the sense my children will never grow up in the Britain I knew.

And he had to watch his nation go to bits and go to pieces and become a weak nation with no influence. And furthermore, he not only had to watch that, but he had to tell the people it was going to happen before it happened, which makes them suffer before the disaster comes. He had to tell them ***BEFOREHAND***. More than that, he had to tell them, when all the other prophets were saying, "He's wrong, Jeremiah's wrong. It's going to be right. We'll muddle through." And he had to face the loneliness standing on his own.

God even said, *"Jeremiah, don't you marry, don't you marry. A wife and children will be a liability."* And so, he had no one. Even his own family plotted to kill him at one stage. And he was alone with God. And in that loneliness with God---and in the agony of it, when sometimes he blamed God for it all---and he just cried out to God in utter honesty, *"Why? Why God did you push me into this? I loathe the job."*

In that solitary walk with God, he discovered the secret of ***PERSONAL RELIGION***. And out of the agony and suffering, there comes some of the finest scriptures you can find on how to stand alone with God. It's a most moving story. And he did it not just for one year, or two years, or 10 years, or 20, or 30, or 40...but 45, until the captivity.

And then he had to say something that made him appear a traitor. He had to say to the nation, "Accept captivity willingly. Go with them. Don't fight it." They said, "You're a traitor against your country." He said, "No, it's no use fighting. God says it's no use; so, accept it. Go with him." And he had to see it through.

It's because of this that there is one chapter in Jeremiah that brings you straight to the cross. That is almost a description of our Lord's trial. It's an astonishing coincidence. But Jeremiah understood the sufferings of Jesus.

***The Importance of God SPEAKING***

May I finish with this word, underlining it, to whom the word of the Lord came? God went on speaking. That is the incredible thing. Down and down went the nation, but God went on ***SPEAKING***.

And this is the most important thing in a nation's life. When Josiah's king, when Jehoiakim is king, when Zedekiah is on the throne, when these battles are taking place---what is the most significant feature? The word of the Lord came. You find that in Luke, chapter three. You remember, *"When so-and-so was Caesar, and so-and-so was governor, and so-and-so was high priest, the word of the Lord came to John."*

And the most important thing that will happen in Britain in the next few months is that the word of the Lord will come. And prophecies are already coming from God about this nation; some of them I will read to you from time to time as we study Jeremiah, for God is still speaking to Britain. In words that read almost identical to Jeremiah, there's an astonishing parallel in some of the prophecies that are being given. And we shall listen to some of those prophecies. God is speaking to Britain now in almost identical fashion to Jeremiah. As we study Jeremiah, we're going to listen to what God is saying today as well. And the fact that God is still speaking means that in his mercy and grace, he's not finished with us, and he's not wiped us out; and he's still waiting for people who will listen and obey. "The words of Jeremiah, the word of the Lord." Let us pray.

Oh, Holy Father, as we go into this prophecy together Sunday by Sunday, may your Holy Spirit so prepare our hearts that we are ready to receive, even if your words are not comfortable. But Lord, thank you that you're still speaking. Thank you that the heavens are not as brass. And, oh, we pray, continue to have mercy on this nation, and therefore, on us, for we're part of it. And on our world, as it hastens to the disaster which you've promised will come. Oh Lord, may your people be alert and awake. For your namesake. Amen.