

The choir will lead our worship by singing Psalm number 14. You may like to follow it in your Bible. Psalm 14.

***SINGING (2.5 minutes)***

Shall we turn to the Book of the prophet Jeremiah? We are studying on these Sunday mornings this prophet and finding him to be so **RELEVANT** to our needs of Britain today---even more relevant this week, since the Archbishop of Canterbury's public message to the nation. Jeremiah 5 and 6. This morning I'm going to read from the Living Bible instead of the Revised Standard because it'll bring home the Word of God, I think, even more forcibly as we've listened to that singing. I want to say thank you to the choir because it hurt, but the Word of God does **HURT** before it can **HEAL**; and that's what Jeremiah's words do.

Chapter 5. *Rush up and down through every street in Jerusalem. Search high and low and see if you can find one fair and honest man. Search every square and if you find just* ***ONE****, I'll not destroy the city. Even under oath they lie. Oh Lord, you will take nothing but* ***TRUTH****. You have tried to get them to be honest for you. You have punished them, but they won't change. You have destroyed them, but they* ***REFUSE*** *to turn from their sins. They are determined with faces hard as rock, not to repent. Then I said, "But what can we expect from the poor and ignorant? They don't know the ways of God. How can they obey him? I will go now to their leaders---the men of importance---and speak to them, for they know the ways of the Lord and the judgment that follows sin," but they too had utterly* ***REJECTED*** *God.*

*"So (says God), I will send upon them the wild fury of the* ***LION*** *from the forest. The desert* ***WOLVES*** *shall pounce upon them, and a* ***LEOPARD*** *shall lurk around their cities so that all who go out shall be torn apart for their sins of very many. Their* ***REBELLION*** *against me is great. How can I pardon you, for even your children have turned away and worship gods that are not gods at all. I fed my people until they were fully satisfied, and their thanks were to commit adultery wholesale, and gang up at the city brothels. They're well-fed, lusty stallions, each name for his neighbor's mate. Shall I not* ***PUNISH*** *them for this? Shall I not send my* ***VENGEANCE*** *on such a nation as this? Go down the rows of the vineyards and destroy them but leave a scattered few to live. Strip the branches from each vine, for they are not the Lord's.*

*"For the people of Israel and Judah are full of treachery against me," says the Lord. "They've lied and said, 'He won't bother us. No evil will come upon us. There will be neither famine nor war. God's prophets,' they say, 'are windbags full of words with no divine authority. Their claims of doom will fall upon themselves, not us.'" Therefore, this is what the Lord God of heaven's armies says to His prophets. "Because of talk like this, I'll take your words and prophecies and turn them into raging fire and burn up these people like kindling wood. See, I will bring a distant nation against you O Israel," says the Lord, "a mighty nation, an ancient nation whose language you don't understand; their weapons are deadly. The men are all mighty, and they shall eat your harvest, and your children's bread, and your flocks of sheep, and herds of cattle, yes, and your grapes and figs; and they shall sack your walled cities that you think are safe. "But I will not completely blot you out," so says the Lord. "And when your people ask, 'Why is it that the Lord is doing this to us,' then you shall say, 'You* ***REJECTED*** *him and gave yourselves to other gods while in your land. Now you must be slaves to foreigners in their lands.'"*

*Make this announcement to Judah and to Israel. "Listen, O foolish, senseless people---you with the eyes that do not see and the ears that do not listen---have you no respect at all for me?" the Lord God asks. "How can it be that you don't even tremble in my presence. I set the shorelines of the world by perpetual decrees so that the oceans, though they toss and roar, can never pass those bounds. Isn't such a God to be feared and worshiped? But my people have rebellious hearts. They've turned against me and gone off into idolatry.*

*"Though I am the one who gives them rain each year in spring and autumn and sends the harvest times, yet they have no respect or fear for me. And so, I've taken away these wondrous blessings from them. This sin has robbed them of all these good things. Among my people are wicked men who lurk for victims like a hunter hiding in a blind. They set their traps for men. Like a coop full of chickens, their homes are full of evil plots. And the result? Now they are great, and rich, and well-fed, and well-groomed; and there is no limit to their wicked deeds. They refuse justice to orphans, and the rights of the poor. Should I sit back and act as though nothing is going on?" the Lord God asks. "Shouldn't I punish such a nation as this? A* ***HORRIBLE*** *thing has happened in this land. The priests are ruled by false prophets, and my people like it so; but your doom is certain."*

*Run people of Benjamin, run for your lives.* ***FLEE*** *from Jerusalem. Sound the alarm in Tekoa, send up a smoke signal at Beth-hakkerem. Warn everyone that a powerful army is on its way from the north, coming to destroy this nation. Helpless as a girl, you are beautiful and delicate and doomed. Evil shepherds shall surround you. They shall set up camp around the city and divide your pastures for their flocks. See them prepare for battle---at noon it has begun. All afternoon it rages, until the evening shadows fall. "Come," they say, "let us attack by night and destroy her palaces." For the Lord of heaven's armies has said to them, "Cut down her trees for battering rams. Smash down the walls of Jerusalem. This is the city to be punished for she is vile through and through. She spouts evil like a fountain. Her streets echo with the sounds of violence. Her sickness and wounds are ever before me.*

*"This is your last warning, O, Jerusalem. If you don't listen, I will empty the land. Disaster on disaster shall before you. Even the few who remain in Israel shall be gleaned again," the Lord of heaven's armies has said. "For as a great gatherer checks each vine to pick what he has missed, so the remnant of my people shall be destroyed again. But who will listen? When I warn them, their ears are closed, and they refuse to hear. The Word of God has angered them. They don't want it at all. For all this, I am full of the* ***WRATH*** *of* ***GOD*** *against them. I'm weary of holding it in. I will pour it out over Jerusalem, even upon the children playing in the streets, and upon the gatherings of young men, and on husbands and wives, and grandparents. Their enemies shall live in their homes and take their fields and wives; for I will punish the people of this land," the Lord has said. "They are swindlers and liars---from the least of them right to the top. Yes, even my prophets and priests. You can't heal a wound by saying, 'It's not there,' yet the priests and prophets give assurances of peace when all is war. Were my people ashamed when they worshiped* ***IDOLS****? No, not at all. They didn't even blush. Therefore, they lie among the slain; they shall die beneath my anger. Yet the Lord pleads with you still. Ask where the good road is---the godly path you used to walk in in the days of long ago. Travel there and you will find rest for your souls. But you reply, 'No, that is not the road we want.'*

*"I set watchman over you who warned you. 'Listen for the sound of the trumpet, it will let you know when trouble comes,' but you said 'No, we won't pay any attention.'"*

*"This then is my* ***DECREE*** *against my people.* ***LISTEN*** *to it, distant lands. Listen to it, O my people in Jerusalem. Listen to it all the earth. I will bring* ***EVIL*** *upon this people. It will be the fruit of their own sin because they will not listen to me. They reject my law. There is no use now in burning sweet incense from Sheba before me. Keep your expensive perfumes. I cannot accept your offerings. They have no sweet fragrance for me. I will make an obstacle course of the pathway of my people. Fathers and sons shall be frustrated. Neighbors and friends shall collapse together. The Lord God says, 'See the army is marching from the north, a great nation rising against you. They are a cruel, merciless people, fully armed, mounted for war. The noise of their army is like a roaring sea.'"*

*We have heard the fame of their armies and we are weak with fright. Frightened pains have gripped us like that of women in travail. Don't go out to the fields, don't travel the roads; for the enemy is everywhere, ready to kill. We are terrorized at every turn. Oh Jerusalem, pride of my people, put on mourning clothes, and sit in ashes and weep bitterly as for an only son; for* ***SUDDENLY*** *the destroying armies will be upon you.*

*"Jeremiah, I have made you an assayer of metals, that you may test this my people and determine their value. Listen to what they're saying and watch what they're doing. Are they not the worst of* ***REBELS****, full of evil talk against the Lord? They are insolent as brass, hard and cruel as iron. The bellows blow fiercely. The refining fire grows hotter, but it can never cleanse them, for there is no pureness in them to bring out. Why continue the process longer? All is* ***DROSS****. No matter how hot the fire, they continue in their* ***WICKED*** *ways. I must label them 'impure, rejected silver', and I must discard them."*

***Israel: A Demonstration of the Justice and Mercy of God***

There are **TWO** very remarkable things about the nation of **ISRAEL** which the world finds difficult to understand. The **FIRST** is their **SUFFERING** and the **SECOND** is their **SURVIVAL**. This nation has suffered more than any other nation on earth, and this nation has survived better than any other nation on earth, and the reason is very simple. They are the people of God, and their **SUFFERING** is a perfect demonstration of the **JUSTICE** of God and their **SURVIVAL** is a perfect demonstration of the **MERCY** of God---for God is a God of truth. When he makes a promise, he keeps it. When he threatens to **PUNISH** those who disobey, he does precisely that; and when he **CALLS** people, he calls them without repentance; and if he calls the nation, they will survive and therefore Israel is a **PERFECT EXAMPLE** to all the other nations of the world of the **SECRET OF HISTORY**.

I think again of that men, Karl Marx sitting in the round reading room of the British museum---reading, studying, thinking with a brilliant intellect; and he was trying to find the laws of history which would explain why nations came and went, which would explain the struggle of the human race; and he came up with his answer. It's an answer called **DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM**. It's an answer that is not true because Karl Marx, Jew though he was, **REJECTED** from his analysis and his thinking, the **GOD** of the Jews and the **JEWS** of God; and the result was he missed the meaning of history, and though a quarter of the world's population are now living under his theory, nevertheless, it does not explain history.

He missed that the real clue to the laws of history are not dialectical materialism but **DIVINE MORALITY**. And if he'd only studied his own God in the history of his own people as a Jew, he would've understood why peoples come and go... and why the atlas changes... and why nations and empires wax and wane. He'd have understood! And when you read a prophet like Jeremiah---who also looked at history but looked at the God of Israel and the Israel of God and understood why things happened as they did---it's only when you do this that you **UNDERSTAND** how history operates and why empires rise and fall.

There` is a **PROCESS**---a very simple logical process---clearly discernible in history, most clearly in **ISRAEL** as if God wanted us to look to that nation supremely to understand how the rest of us are to live and how the rest of our history operates. Now, when we first read through Jeremiah 5 to 6, it seemed perhaps to you like a jumble---almost like a tirade---of separate prophecies jumping from one subject to another. In a sense it is. These prophecies were not all given at the same time. They were not read together as we've just read them. This is a **COMPILATION** of words that burst from Jeremiah's lips time after time; and someone collected them and put them together. A man called **BARACK** wrote them down, so we've got them in a systematic form. They burst spontaneously from Jeremiah; yet even though they come to us in a rather higgledy-piggledy fashion---just pushed together in the book called Jeremiah---yet you can analyze them (usually, as you know I analyze them) in the order in which they occur.

***Three Spiritual Laws of History***

This morning I'm not going to do that. This morning I'm going to look at the analysis of history which emerges from these two chapters---the explanation as to why nations come and go. And it can all be said in just ***THREE* SIMPLE LOGICAL LAWS OF HISTORY**, or one law with three stages. The laws of cause and effect apply rigidly in this setting. Stage **NUMBER ONE**: ***SPIRITUAL DECLINE***. That is the cause inevitably of stage **NUMBER TWO**: ***MORAL DECADENCE***; and that is the cause inevitably of stage **NUMBER THREE**: ***NATIONAL DESTRUCTION***. That's the lesson written over history, but supremely and most clearly written over the nation of Israel, for every single detail threatened in these two chapters I've read, came **TRUE** to the **LETTER**, to the absolute letter. And you can go to that same British museum where Karl Marx wrote *'Das Kapital'* and you can see the evidence in stone of these very things.

Go and see the Lachish stone if you want to see the fulfillment of the words, which we have just read. It happened. These are God's laws of history. They cannot be broken, they can only be illustrated. These are the **NEGATIVE** law is true; as in her earlier years, Israel illustrated the **POSITIVE** law, that the nation that seeks God will be blessed and will have ample harvest. We've (in England) got a rather poor harvest display this year quite deliberately, because we've had a bad year (spiritually); and we are going to draw out the spiritual lesson from that. The farmers have had a bad year. Are we going to fear God? Or as long as we can get enough food from the supermarket, are we not going to bother to ask, "Is there any significance in the fact that the Lord did not give us the rains we needed this year?" You may have enjoyed getting sunburned, but you'll pay for it this winter when you go and try and buy potatoes and bread. We'll come back to that.

***Spiritual Law #1: Spiritual Decline***

Let's now turn to those three spiritual laws. Law **NUMBER ONE**, when a nation goes into ***SPIRITUAL DECLINE*** and ceases to be afraid of God, she will become far more afraid of other things--- unemployment, violence, inflation---but not fear of God. This is the ***ROOT PROBLEM*** which causes all other troubles. This is the root problem of our nation... though it is not as clearly seen as it is in the nation of Israel, which was that much closer to God. That's why they suffered more than others: because their privileges were greater than others and they had a closer relationship (to God) than we as a nation have. Nevertheless, the same law applies. Let's look at **HOW** this spiritual decline happened in their nation.

**FIRST** of all, it happened because the people generally ***FORSOOK GOD*** and tried other religions. That's the first thing that happened. Their people rebelled. They had a history---a long history---of knowing the true God and of hearing the truth about God; but they became crazy to try new religions---anything for kicks---and that is precisely what our nation has done. We've had the Christian faith for nearly 2,000 years; but now any religion but Christianity seems to be of interest and attraction. On the morning BBC Radio you can listen to talks on Buddhism, meditation, anything you like to name. We are now being labeled a pluralistic society and that is true. We've got to face facts. Anybody can worship any God they like. If we ever were a Christian country (which I doubt) there's certainly no doubt that we are **NO LONGER** a Christian country. We are a pluralistic society, which even those brought up in church and Sunday school will try any religion at all, from astrology, through black magic, to anything that can be imported from the east, or the far east, or anywhere else. And if we can invent a few religions, so much the better. Once we've exhausted earth, we can always go out into space and have a chariot of the gods visiting this planet and bring yet other gods to us. Our imagination knows no bounds whatever in trying **ANYTHING** but the **TRUTH**.

Now, that's what happened in Israel, and they had forsaken the true God for a God called ‘***BAAL’***, which means *'husband'.* And I've described for you this foul fertility cult; and Baal means *'husband'*. And sexual orgies were part of every act of worship. When we were in Corbière in Jersey just last week, there was a little road near the hotel labeled 'Rue de Baal' (the very word!), and some of our company thought they'd walk up that road for a little walk. And you know what they found just up the road? They found a brand-new top security prison---barbed wire and all. There's a **PARABLE** there. I think they knew I'd use it in a sermon sooner or later, but what a parable. The Rue de Baal looked like a road that led to nice places, but it led to prison. And this is what they (Israel) found, the road of Baal. It looked nice, it looked enjoyable. It looked like a road of free love, but in fact it became a road of feted lust instead of free love. And they found themselves in jail, imprisoned, trapped. They had **FORSAKEN GOD** and tried other things that looked more interesting. But what were the religious leaders doing to let this happen? The sad part is that Jeremiah, when he looked at the **RELIGIOUS LEADERS**, found that they had not stopped the rot, because the priests were only interested in carrying on the public services and carrying on the offerings. And the cathedrals were still open, and things were still being said publicly. And the tragedy is that this land of Israel still called itself the land of God and still thought that they were a godly country; and the priests had no idea that it just made God sick. Even the religion, even the offerings, even the sacrifices---the most expensive incense and perfume offered to God stank in God's nostrils. Of course, it did. If you give someone a present and you don't love that person, doesn't that present become an **OFFENSE**? Of course, it does. You can't substitute **LOVE** with ***PRESENTS***. Oh yes, the man may try to. He may---when he feels a bit guilty---go out and buy his wife some flowers; but what she wants is a **RIGHT** **RELATIONSHIP** with him. Then the flowers will be acceptable. But the flowers are an offense if they're an excuse... if they're an attempt to get round the real situation. And the **PRIESTS** were not only going through all the formal rigmarole; the **PROPHETS** (and here we come to the saddest part of all) the preachers of the day---a very few used to speak the truth, but the people didn't want to hear. They scoffed. They said, "We don't believe anything will happen. Nothing will happen to us. No evil will come. We're not going to listen to Jeremiah. We're not going to listen to doom and gloom. Things will pan out all right---they always have done in the past. Nothing will happen of this disaster." And they **SCOFFED** and **SCORNED**. They heard but they did not **HEAR**. They saw but they did not **SEE**. And their problem was not ignorance but **STUBBORNNESS**. They knew the truth, but they wouldn't accept it. But the tragedy is that most of the prophets **WOULDN'T** preach the truth because they didn't want to be called WINDBAGS. That's what they called any prophet who spoke the truth. A windbag... a windbag. He'll blow himself away, not us. But most of the prophets told the people ***WHAT THEY WANTED TO HEAR***. And this is the biggest pressure on a preacher. It's the biggest pressure on a man of God who wants to speak the truth, because people want comfort, they want soothing, they want nice things said. And the false prophets said all this and, *"They healed the wound of my people lightly and said, 'Peace, peace where there was no peace.'* You can't heal a wound by pretending it isn't there," said Jeremiah. "You don't really help people by saying it's all really nice and smooth."

The Archbishop appeals to the enormous number of good people in this land---inside and outside the church. Do you think that's really an appeal that will get through to the REAL problem? Is it not the **ENORMOUS NUMBER** of ***BAD*** people inside and outside the church that is the REAL problem? Is it just a few radicals calling the evils of our society? Are we not **ALL OF US** part of the affluent indulgent mess? That's the question. Is it going to pan out all right, or are the prophets of dooms speaking the truth? Certain it is that where you've got **FALSE PROPHETS** preaching peace and comfort where there is none, and **PRIESTS** going through the rigmarole as a kind of religious aspect of society, and the **PEOPLE** who are trying anything they're interested in in-between, you have got the **FIRST FACTOR** in the moral process of the breakdown of a nation which is destroyed, not from outside but from ***INSIDE***, long before it's destroyed from outside.

And so, says Jeremiah, the tragedy is---the real root is---**YOU NO LONGER ARE *AFRAID* OF GOD!** And he said, to illustrate the fact that you should fear God, "Let me mention just one thing on which your very life depends. **WATER**, water." Have you ever realized how delicate is the balance of water on planet earth? There is no life on all the planets out in space. We've probed; we've taken photographs. What have we been looking for? Water!! Because without water there's no life. We can't find it. This little planet of ours has water...water. And what a delicate balance it's in. Says, Jeremiah, *"Do you realize that it's God who has set the bounds of the ocean?"* And he has. You look at this planet earth from outer space...look at the photographs taken by the astronauts, and you see that when you look at the Pacific, you can hardly see any land. Almost the whole planet is water. The size of the ocean---nine miles deep, thousands of miles across. What an expansive water. And do you know that if the polar ice caps melted, the oceans would rise 200 feet; and that would wipe out almost every major city in the world. "Who bids the mighty ocean deep, its own appointed limits keep." Does that not make you afraid of God? The only thing God would need to do would say, "Ice melt!" Most of London would disappear beneath the waves. Don't you fear God?

And then think of the **CONTROL**. Millions upon millions of tons of water are lifted out of that ocean and dropped on the land to keep us alive. And yet it's dropped in tiny drops, so that it is not a threat; millions of tons of water are transferred by God; and he sends the rain from heaven. Just two and a half inches in 48 hours, the first weekend I was here, and our High Street was five feet underwater... just two and a half inches. Think of the balance. Think of God in control. "Don't you fear God," says Jeremiah, "when you just consider the one thing water, without which we could not live." And God moves millions of tons of water around. He says to the ocean, "Stay there." He drops that water just drop by drop on us so that we're safe.

Do we fear God because God has turned the tap off this summer? In Jersey, the farmers were saying it's the worst year we've had in a long time. The spring potatoes were that (tiny) size... they lacked rain. By the time the tomatoes were ripe and filled, well, the English tomatoes were ahead of ours (in Jersey) and we couldn't sell to England. It was a bad year. I saw farmers feeding hay to their cattle in the middle of August; and we've been so short of straw that farmers in the west country were shredding old newspapers to provide bedding for their cattle. That's the harvest we've had this year. Do you not fear God? We're so afraid of what **MAN** is doing to the environment. What **MAN** is polluting the oceans with, that we don't ask about God... what about God in all this? He would only need to upset that balance a tiny fraction and we're finished.

He gives us a **HARVEST**; he gives us the **RAIN**. He keeps the oceans where they are. Aren't you afraid of Him? No. We're more afraid of pollution by ***MAN*** than control by ***GOD***. We've ceased to think of God as being in control of it, and so we're not afraid anymore. Now, when a nation fears unemployment, and inflation, and violence more than it fears God, it has taken the first step down this slippery slope.

***Spiritual Law #2: Moral Decadence***

Now what is the **SECOND STEP**? It follows inevitably. The second step is ***MORAL DECADENCE***, for belief affects behavior...creed affects conduct. If one generation says, "Why be married in church?" The ***next*** generation will say, "Why be **MARRIED**?" If one generation says, "Why bother with God?" The ***next*** generation will say, "Why bother to be **GOOD**?" If one generation says, "Why bother to worship?" The ***next*** generation will say, "Why bother to **WORK**?"

It is inevitable. It's a **PROCESS** and you can't halt that process. It goes on. Once the ***SPIRITUAL*** ***DECLINE*** has taken place, the ***MORAL DECADENCE*** follows. Now, we have some wonderful impressions in Jeremiah 5 of his first visit to the big city---what he saw when he left the village in which he'd been brought up. In an earlier sermon, I talked (in imagination) about Jeremiah living in Hemmel Hempstead, but it would be in the days before that was a town and when it was just a little hamlet. From the hamlet, imagine Jeremiah coming to London, walking from Trafalgar Square to Piccadilly Circus. The country boy comes to town. What were his first impressions? Well, his first impression was of undeterred guile. Probably lost a bit of money fairly quickly through a crooked dealer trying to sell him something on the streets. As he walked around the streets, he realized that people were just ***NO LONGER HONEST OR FAIR,*** that each of them was out to trick his neighbor. And this country lad probably got duped by a number of traders. And he began to say, "Is there any honest dealer around here...any truthful men whose word you can trust?" Because you see, the whole of commerce depends on **TRUST**...depends on the fact that your word is as good as your bond. It depends on the fact that on every pound note the Bank of England says, "I promise to pay the bearer the sum of one pound." Do you know that even that trust is now going, because people are spending early for Christmas because their pound by Christmastime won't be worth what it is now. And you could see the streets of Gilford yesterday full of Christmas shoppers talking about Christmas--buying already, because that pound note, they can't trust the word on it, "Promise to pay the bearer."

And so, commerce and business depends on **GOOD FAITH**. And wherever Jeremiah went, he found **GUILE**. He found that ordinary people just weren't to be trusted anymore. Do you remember my telling you about the Indian student who came to England after being converted through a missionary's work out in India? The missionary was very worried as to what the Indian student's impression of London would be....Christian England He looked forward to coming and seeing this country. But when he came back to India, the missionary said, "How did you get on?" He said, "Marvelous. In the first morning in London, I saw three miracles". "What did you see"? "Well," he said, "I saw three miracles on a bus". He said, "Somebody had to get off a bus before the conductor had come downstairs (the conductor was upstairs); and the somebody getting off gave the money for the fare to someone sitting there: miracle number one. When the conductor came down after the passenger had got off the bus, the other passenger gave the conductor the money: miracle number two. And when the conductor received the money, he didn't put it into his pocket but into his bag and he issued a ticket for it: miracle number three." But that happened in 1920. That happened in 1920. Would he see three miracles ***TODAY***?

And that's what Jeremiah noticed. He noticed **SECONDLY**, because he thought, "Well these are just the **ORDINARY** folk, they're poor, they're ignorant." And they were in those days. He said, "They're uneducated...they don't know any better. But it's the ***LEADERS***. I'll go and see the leaders. I'll go to the top; I'll go to the men in the government and see...surely **THEY** know the way of the Lord." And when Jeremiah got to the houses of parliament, he found that they were as unprincipled as the ordinary people in the street---that their private lives would bear no more examination than the crooked traders he'd met. And ***UNPRINCIPLED GOVERNMENT*** was one of the things that Jeremiah saw in the capital city---men of political expediency, but lacking principle. Then he moved on and he found ***UNCHARITABLE GREED*** right through society from the bottom to the top. It's the thing the archbishop has mentioned this week. But he saw such greed, that they were prepared to gain---illegally, immorally---any way they could to make money; any way they could to get business---bribery, corruption---any way they could. And if you know anything about business today, you know that it's almost impossible in some spheres of business to run a business at all, if you're honest. Used to be able to be said that 'honesty was the best policy'. But that depends on an ***HONEST SOCIETY***. And once you've lost that, it is no longer the best policy. And then you find out who's honest---whether it's the best policy or not, don't you?

And so, it's becoming more and more difficult. Jeremiah uses a picture of a **FOWLER**---a poacher---setting his traps to catch people; knowing that he's not getting gain the honest way, but just setting traps and trapping other people in it. Who suffers in that kind of a society? I tell you, the people who can't defend themselves---the orphans and the needy; and Jeremiah says, "These people, they can't keep up in a society that's become a jungle---where it's every man from himself. It's the helpless who suffer. It's the people at the bottom who go further down, while everybody else is scrambling further up." Isn't this incredibly relevant...incredibly relevant?

So, that's what he saw. And he said the worst thing of all is this, that they cannot even ***BLUSH***. Now God has given us an ability to blush. Have you ever thanked God for the ability to blush? No, we don't usually thank God for that because it's an embarrassment to us, right? We don't like to be seen blushing. But isn't it a **GIFT** of God; and isn't it a sign that you've got so far away from God when you can no longer blush? You see, moral decadence reaches a point where people are no longer ***ASHAMED***, no longer ***EMBARRASED***, no longer ***BLUSHING***.

***Spiritual Law #3: Societal Collapse***

Now the **THIRD STAGE** of this moral process---this is not dialectical materialism (which does **NOT** explain what happens), this is divine morality (which does explain what happens). The third position, the third stage is this. When religious and moral values have gone, then society loses its stability and ***COLLAPSES***.

It collapses from ***INSIDE*** long before anybody from **OUTSIDE** attacks. The real rot has set in. Read Gibbon's *'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'* for a marvelous example. But if you want a much clearer example, read the life and times of Israel. It's all there. And God says in vivid picture language, the **LION**, the **WOLF**, the **LEOPARD** are coming. It's a jungle now. He says that it's like a vineyard and a grape gatherer going through it to see if he's missed one grape, to pick the last little thing off you and leave your stripped and bare. He said, "It's like a forest fire; and the words of my prophet Jeremiah will become burning words which will be like a spark to kindling wood, and burn you up," ...vivid pictures!

***Three Specific Punishments***

But there are **THREE EXAMPLES** of specific ***PUNISHMENT*** mentioned here. **NUMBER ONE**, God's first punishment for them was ***FAILED CROPS***...failed crops. It was the first way he tried to get through to them and show them what they were really like. And so, poor crops came, and the rains didn't come; and food was scarce and expensive, and the poor and the needy had to struggle most...but that was the first way God tried to get through to them. *"Your iniquities have turned the rains away."* And the ***IRONY*** of it all was that they had worshiped Baal because he was the fertility God who would give them fertility of the land, as well as in their relationships. And God says, *"It's not Baal; it's* ***ME****, and your crops have failed".*

The harvest of 1975 has been a bad one throughout the world. You may not be aware that there was a major climatic shift in 1970; and the meteorologist thought at first that it was just a temporary swing---one of those cycles that happens---but it has not gone back. And the tragedy is that the rain belts and the snow belts of the world have narrowed by hundreds of miles. That's why there's drought and disaster right along through Chad and Ethiopia. That's the belt just above the tropical rain belt and the belt below has done the same. So, we've got floods in this area---floods in Bangladesh---and drought here and here; and it's happened in the north too, and our summer is now shorter than it was. And we will have milder winters and wetter, cooler summers (in general) over the years that lie ahead. And we may have lost already a week of the harvest period since 1970. Does this not make us fear God? It's in a sense God's first card...His first warning.

The **SECOND** warning he gave to Israel was that of a ***FEARFUL CONFLICT***. In this case He used, not nature, but human beings. And he said, *"I'm bringing a fearful foe from the north, cruel and relentless".* We now know who that was. It was **BABYLON**...Babylon, and they were **CRUEL** and **RELENTLESS**. Can you imagine what it's like being occupied by a people whose language you can't speak? You can't plead for mercy---they don't know what you are saying, and you don't know what they're saying. You can't talk to them. You can't negotiate with them. They do not speak to you---they're strangers, they're foreigners. *"And I'm bringing to you a people whose language you do not understand; and they will take your lands and your shops and your wives."*

In fact, there's a vivid picture here of Jerusalem as a helpless, beautiful girl. And in ancient warfare there was no person in a more desperate or vulnerable position than a beautiful girl in a country that was being invaded. The invading army regarded her as **SOMETHING** rather than ***SOMEONE***: spoils of war. And, *"O, Jerusalem, you're like a helpless maiden, beautiful and delicate and doomed."*

And the **FINAL** punishment of God which would burst on children, adolescents, married adults, senior citizens, and the elderly would be this: *"As you have chosen foreign gods from other lands rather than the God of your own land, then I will send you to those lands. You've already gone there in heart, and you will be deported and there will be a* ***FORCED CAPTIVITY OF ISRAEL****."* And for 70 years that happened. You see the third stage of this process is that you are **NO LONGER *AWARE* OF DANGER**.

**If you notice the three steps**---**1) spiritual decline**---you are no longer ***afraid* of deity. 2) Moral decadence**---you are no longer ***ashamed* of disgrace**. And finally, **3) national destruction**---you're no longer ***aware* of danger**. And one of the most tragic things in this passage is where the people say, "He will do nothing. Punishment is incompatible with a God of love." That's what they were saying: *"He will do nothing. No evil will come to us."* And oh, this is being said even within the churches of ***OUR*** land. Clergy no longer believe in a God who punishes. And again, the Archbishop says, "Let us live out our faith that God reigns and cares". This nation needs to hear about a God who ***PUNISHES*** as well. That's the God we're **NOT** hearing about...only a God who cares; but it's a God who cares about ***TRUTH*** as well as people, who cares about ***JUSTICE*** as well as joy.

God does care very deeply about all these things and even when it happens to them, *"Even in those days,"* says the Lord, *"your people will say, 'Why has the Lord our God done all these things? Why?'"* (Just as people said in World War II, which was needed to bring us to our senses, and which did.) How many people on the radio, on TV this week have been saying, "We were all together in the war. We faced the common enemy. We fought together. We were on our toes. We had far less goods maybe, but we had far more grit." But even when it comes, they said, "Why did God allow this to happen? Why did God send a war? Why? Why?" Its incredible stupidity and stubbornness that can be so unaware of the **DANGERS** of living sinful lives in the presence of a holy God---just totally unaware of it.

***There is Still Room for Optimism***

I must close and I close on a slightly more ***OPTIMISTIC*** note. There is optimism in these two chapters. One of the little rays of hope is this. God says, ***"I WILL NOT MAKE A FULL END."*** Twice He says it. *"I'll punish the nation, I'll take them away, but I will not make a full end"*. That's one way of hope. And there's one other that comes home to me so forcibly that this is the one thing I want to say this morning. It's an incredible thing. Something the Archbishop said this week was this, "Every man counts."

Now humanly speaking, that is a silly thing to say, because don't we all feel **HELPLESS** as individuals? We're just one little person out of 60 million. "How can I change this situation?" There's a frustration. Well now you couldn't if you're only one, or two, or even a handful, even a minority. I know Abraham Lincoln said that 5% of the population can change public opinion. I believe that to be true; but I can only find 1.5% **REAL** Christians in our land. And therefore, the first task, if we're going to change public opinion...our first immediate target...is to triple the number of committed Christians. When we've done that, we shall see the beginnings of a change in public opinion; but not until then.

But I'm still not hopeless for this reason. Listen. At the beginning of Jeremiah 5, God says, *"Jeremiah, go through Jerusalem, search the squares. See if you can find* ***ONE****, one upright man that I may pardon her".* Now, does that hit you? You'd have expected to read. Find me one upright man that I may pardon ***HIM***. No. *"Find one upright man that I may pardon* ***HER****."* God wants to pardon; and he will spare a nation for the sake of **ONE** upright man in this city. That's what happened to Sodom. Sodom was pretty degraded. Just a look at its nightclubs would've convinced you that that city was ready for destruction; and Abraham pleaded with God. *"God, if there were 40, 50 righteous men in the city, just 50 out of the whole city, would you destroy it?"* God says, *"Would I destroy it? Do you think I would? The judge of all the earth." "40, 10, five?"* And Abraham knew that God will spare a city for the sake of a few godly men in it.

That's when **MINORITIES** count. God's not asking for the whole nation to turn. God is too much of a realist. But he says, *"Just find me* ***ONE*** *man in that city, that I may pardon her".* The tragedy is that Jeremiah went through the city and God says, "You're like an assayer of silver. You're trying to find in all this ore---in all this dross---you're to find some sterling silver that I can stamp as 'sterling silver'. See if you can find one man that I can stamp as 'sterling silver'." And Jeremiah went through, and he came back. He said, "I can't find any. It's ***ALL*** dross." We would call it ‘fool’s gold’. Up in the Lake district where this gray green slate came from---in Cambria---there is ***'fool’s gold'*** and you can really be fooled buying something that says it's gold in the Lake district. It's only iron pyrites. You can see it. Those of you sitting in the front row, look in that piece, I think there, or that piece there. Can you see some little pieces of gold right in the stone? Look very hard, and you'll see some tiny pieces of 'fool’s gold' along the front curb and there are one or two pieces here. Come and look at it afterwards. It's 'fool’s gold'. And you may think you've struck gold in Millmead. You may start digging it out. You try refining that. You try melting that down. See if you get any gold; you get ***NONE***! That's what happened to Jeremiah, he went through that city---sifting it, refining it with the fire of His **WORDS**. And as the fire of His words burnt through that city, did he get silver---sterling silver? No!

There's a wonderful PUN here, a play on words. And it's a pun that can be done in English too. In Hebrew, the word ***'REFUSE'*** and the word ***'REFUSE'*** are the same word; and they are in English. This is what Jeremiah says. *"It's all 'refuse' silver because they have 'refused' God and therefore God has* ***'refused'*** *them****."* IF YOU *REFUSE* GOD, YOU BECOME *REFUSE*...REFUSE**. Fool’s silver...fool’s silver. But that need not happen to Britain. And part of that prophecy, part of which I read last Sunday morning---and I'll read you more as we go on through the weeks---is a call from God for just **SOME** people...for just **SOME** people in the towns and cities of this land to mean business with God. Just **SOME**!! "Find me one man that I may pardon her, find me one man!" We're not helpless. We're not trapped. We are not unable to change the situation. It depends on whether there can be some godly men and women who respond to God!!!

**HOW**? My last word is this. There is one verse I haven't mentioned yet. I think you'll find I've mentioned every other verse. There's one last verse that says this. ***"GO BACK TO THE ANCIENT PATHS.*** *Go back to the old ways, they are tried and true. Don't mind people calling you old-fashioned. Go back to the* ***old ways****, and you will find* ***REST*** *to your soul."* Now, the old ways for ***ISRAEL*** were to get back to the covenant of the wilderness period, when they had their honeymoon with God. The old way for ***US*** is Him who is the way, ***JESUS***. *"Go back to the ancient way****---'I (Jesus) am the way'****---and you will find* ***rest*** *for your souls."* Amen.

***Verses 1 and 2 of Hymn 429***

"Come let us to the Lord our God,

With CONTRITE hearts RETURN.

0ur God is gracious nor will leave

The desolate to mourn.

His voice commands the tempest forth,

And stills the stormy wave.

And though His arm be strong to SMITE,

It's also strong to SAVE.