

AUTHENTIC COURAGE

Jeremiah 26:1-6 & 12-16

INTRODUCTION:

I want you to see if you can picture this scene: A nation is in turmoil. It owes a tremendous amount of money to other countries. Some of the nation's leaders are using their governmental positions to further their own agendas and enrich their own pockets.

A great patriot arises to buck the political establishment. In a land full of self-serving bureaucrats, he stands alone as a statesman. This statesman tells the people what they *need* to hear even if it is not what they *want* to hear. He tells the hard truth even when all the other leaders are telling tempting lies.

Can you imagine such a situation? It really happened. This all took place over 2500 years ago and almost 6500 miles away. Listen to these words from Jeremiah 26:1-6.

26 *Early in the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: ² “This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD’s house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. ³ Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. ⁴ Say to them, ‘This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, ⁵ and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), ⁶ then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.’”*

Jeremiah was the leader who told the people the truth. He is the man who gave God's word a face and a voice. He is the one who warned about an impending crisis: an intervention when God would bring judgment on His disobedient children. But he also promised that if the people would repent of their wickedness and turn away from idols, they would be spared.

Wouldn't you like to think that a grateful nation would reward such a faithful leader? It didn't happen that way in this case. Hear again the words from Jeremiah 26; this time, verses 10-11.

¹⁰ *When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the LORD and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the LORD’s house. ¹¹ Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, “This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!”*

Jeremiah was tried for treason because he dared to faithfully proclaim God's truth.

Look at Jeremiah and note this remarkable statesman who was about to drown in a sea of politicians – and note the characteristics that made him the right person at the right time.

OUTLINE:

I. HE WAS A MAN WITH A MISSION (26:3)

Jeremiah was born into the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe of Israel. To be born into the tribe of Levi is a little bit like being born a Smucker in Orrville, Ohio: nobody asks you what you want to be when you grow up. Levites became priests. That's just the way it was.

But when Jeremiah was about twenty years old, the word of the Lord came to him and God told him he was not going to serve in the temple as a priest; he was going to serve God as a prophet.

That's not good news for Jeremiah. Priests had a pretty cushy job. The job description for priests was very well defined. All that a priest had to do was follow instructions. Day after day, there were sacrifices to offer, lepers to examine, unclean people to exclude from the camp, cleansed people to reinstate, official ceremonies to observe, a sanctuary to care for, and a Law to teach. Their ministry could become pretty routine and even monotonous.

But the ministry of a prophet was anything but monotonous, anything but routine. He never knew when God would speak to him and give him a word for the people. It could come in the middle of the day or in the middle of the night. It could come in the midst of a period of national grief or a time of national celebration. God's word could come to a prophet when it was convenient or when it was inconvenient. It did not matter.

But whenever God's word came to the prophet, it was to be proclaimed clearly and completely. And quite often, God's word was confrontational. It would challenge the people and their actions. It still does.

Being a prophet was much less popular than being a priest. And much less secure. Priests were rarely martyred; prophets often were. Jeremiah was a prophet, not a priest.

And Jeremiah was a prophet, not a politician. He was tasked with faithfully proclaiming God's truth. Some people mistakenly believe that the work of a prophet is to foretell the future. And there were times that a

prophet did predict events. But that was always in the context of a message to the people about what God wanted them to do right now. The predictive element of prophecy was so that people would understand that today's decisions have future consequences. The prophet would typically tell the people where their lives were headed and what would result if they did not change their ways. His message was, "if you want to change your tomorrow, change your today."

The details of Jeremiah's call are recorded in Jeremiah 1:4-8.

⁴ *The word of the LORD came to me, saying,*

⁵ *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."*

⁶ *"Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."*

⁷ *But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.*

While that is the record of God's call to Jeremiah to the ministry of prophecy, we also can learn about his specific assignment with regard to the sins of Israel. As I read for you a moment ago, God told Jeremiah to stand in the courtyard of the temple and prophecy. It is as if he was told to go to church and tell the religious people that God was not happy with them. Jeremiah was a man with a mission: to speak on behalf of God.

II. HE WAS A MAN WITH A MESSAGE (26:4-6)

Jeremiah was also a man with a message. His message to the people of Jerusalem was:

⁴ *Say to them, 'This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, ⁵ and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), ⁶ then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.'*

The people of Israel seem to have believed that just because they were God's Chosen People, they could live any way they liked and God would still protect them. During the time of Jeremiah, the people had begun to worship idols.

Now, a phrase like that rolls off the tongue pretty easily: "They worshipped idols." We know that isn't right but it couldn't have been a really big deal, could it? You need to know about these idols. They worshipped Ba'al,

the Babylonian god who was considered to be above all gods. They built temples to Ba'al and erected altars to Ba'al and they sacrificed animals to Ba'al.

During the time of Jeremiah, the Israelites had also begun to worship the goddess Asherah. Asherah was a fertility goddess. She was the one the people worshipped if they wanted their cows to have lots of calves, their sheep to have lots of lambs and their wives to have lots of children. Asherah was worshipped by erecting tall monuments on the tops of the hills of the countryside. These tall monuments were built in the shape of male genitals and were called Asherah Poles. The people came together to have unbridled sexual orgies at the base of the pole and they called that worship.

II Kings 21:1-6 preserves a record of these times:

21 *Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. His mother's name was Hephzibah.² He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.³ He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them.⁴ He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my Name."⁵ In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts.⁶ He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.*

There is a reference to another detestable practice among God's people. In addition to worshipping Ba'al and Asherah, in addition to erecting altars to the stars and planets within the courts of God's holy temple, the text says that Manasseh sacrificed his own son in the fire. Not only were the Israelites worshipping Ba'al and Asherah, they were worshipping a false god called "the detestable god, Molech." Altars to Molech were built as large statues. These statues had gaping open mouths and furnaces in their bellies. They were built with their arms outstretched and with a clockwork mechanism in their shoulders. To worship Molech, the devout would place a bound child on the cupped hands of the outstretched arms of the statue and then the clockwork mechanism would be triggered and the child would be thrown through the mouth of the statue to fall into the flames in its belly. People burned their children alive to appease this false god. And among those who did this detestable practice was Manasseh, the king of the Israelites: Manasseh, who was supposed to be their spiritual leader.

Jeremiah was sent with a message to tell the people to turn from their sin and return to God. The message contained the bad news that if they did not turn from their sinful ways, Jerusalem would become like Shiloh. Shiloh had been the first home of the Ark of God's Presence. But because of the sin of the people, God's presence was removed from Shiloh and it became known as the place where God used to be. Jerusalem could become known as the place where God used to be if the people did not change their ways.

I've known churches like that: churches that had a glorious past; churches where God had done great things and His mighty acts were seen; but churches that are now known as where God used to be. The people lost sight of God and lost touch with His Word. God's truth is no longer proclaimed and His message is no longer heard. Their buildings are now monuments to places where God used to be. It happens every time God's Word ceases to be heard among His people.

As a people, we may not have the gift of prophecy but we have the gift of God's Word and we must get the message out: immediately, clearly, tactfully but passionately. Because untold millions remain untold.

III. **HE WAS A MAN WITH METTLE (26:14-15)**

Warnings are funny things. Often the people who stand to benefit the most, resent and reject the warnings. Such was the experience of Jeremiah. The religious people who gathered in the temple heard the words that Jeremiah spoke. They heard the warnings that he delivered. They heard the message that he proclaimed and, by all accounts, they understood it. But they did not accept it.

Not only did they reject God's message, they rejected God's messenger. They said, *"This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city."* We don't like what he had to say so we ought to kill him.

I've preached some sermons that people didn't like. I've preached some that I didn't much care for. But to the best of my knowledge, no one ever put out a contract on me because of my preaching. But that is exactly what happened to Jeremiah.

However, the mettle of the man was shown in his reaction to such unjust and blatant hostility.

¹² *Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard.*

¹³ *Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against*

you. ¹⁴ *As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right.* ¹⁵ *Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.*”

¹⁶ *Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man should not be sentenced to death! He has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God.”*

The mettle of the man was shown in that he resolved to tell the truth no matter what the people did to him. That takes courage: authentic courage. The church must be such a courageous voice for the Lord today. The message that God has given to us is not always popular. It is not always pleasant. It is not always palatable. But it is always the truth. As the people of God, we must demonstrate authentic courage by proclaiming God’s Word no matter what.

CONCLUSION:

In May of 2003, Universal Pictures released the comedy, “Bruce Almighty” starring Jim Carrey. The writers of the script gave God a phone number that Carrey could dial so he could talk with the Almighty. But instead of using the 555 prefix that moviemakers and TV shows generally assign to telephone numbers, they gave God a 776 prefix. Many people who saw the movie wrote the number down and started dialing it. One lady in St. Petersburg, FL received 20 calls an hour from people who wanted to talk to God.

Have you ever wished you could call on God?

- Perhaps His number begins with the 333 prefix because Jeremiah 33:3 reads, *“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.”*
- Perhaps it begins with 563 because Psalm 56:3 reads, *“When I am afraid, I will trust in you.”*
- But I know for a fact that God’s telephone number is in the 618 area code and begins with the 676 prefix. I know that because Acts 17:27 records that God *“is not far from each one of us.”* And James 4:8 assures, *“Come near to God and he will come near to you.”*

Threatened with execution for treason, Jeremiah still faithfully proclaimed God’s Word. In the face of persecution, Jeremiah did not abandon God and God did not abandon Jeremiah. Authentic courage is resolving to remain faithful to the God Who remains faithful to you.

INVITATION: #566 – *“I Am Resolved”*