

OUR WORDS AND GOD'S WORD

The Bible book of Jeremiah begins with these words: "*The words of Jeremiah . . .*". And almost immediately follows this statement: "*The word of the Lord came to him . . .*" We thus have in quick succession these two statements: "*The words of Jeremiah*" and "*The word of Lord*".

Yes, the prophecy of Jeremiah contains a lot of words from Jeremiah. Personal words, words that let you know what Jeremiah was thinking. Words that describe his feelings. Words that let you take a peek into his frame of mind. Words that Jeremiah spoke to God.

But there are also words from God in this book. In fact, we have to say that all the words in this book are from God, because all of Scripture is God-breathed. Jeremiah too was divinely inspired. So Jeremiah's words about himself, his words about God's covenant people, his words directed to other nations, yes, all the words of this prophecy are from God. He, Jeremiah, called to be a prophet, was simply passing on God's Word. He was God's spokesman, God's mouth.

Yet this Bible book opens with: "*The words of Jeremiah . . . to whom the word of the Lord came.*" Most other prophetic books in the Old Testament simply start as follows: "*The word of the Lord that came to Hosea.*" "*The word of the Lord that came to Joel.*" "*The word of the Lord that came to Micah.*" And so on. But some Bible books begin with - "*The words of . . .*" and mentions the name of the one God used to write the book. Jeremiah is such a book.

The New Testament is much the same. Paul, for example, begins all of his letters by saying that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. So do James and Peter. The gospel of Luke is a bit different. In both his gospel and in Acts, his other book, he clearly states that he did the research and wrote these two books.

But whichever way a Bible book begins, the scriptural doctrine of inspiration insists that each book is to be received as the Word of God. Jeremiah's prophecy is no different. When he begins with "*The words of Jeremiah*", then one could even say that this is just another way of saying - the prophecy of Jeremiah, for almost straight after come the words "*The word of the Lord came to him.*"

Yet because of the number of personal words from Jeremiah in this prophecy, more so than what we find of other prophets in their prophecies, except Jonah may be, one wonders if there was perhaps an emotional conflict between Jeremiah as a person and he as a prophet? There may well have been. For in this Bible book you can sense a tension between the man and the prophet, a struggle between the words of Jeremiah and the Word of God that came to Jeremiah.

For example, early on in his life as a prophet, Jeremiah had to tell the people about God's displeasure on them because of their unfaithfulness. But Israel was living a dream. The people assumed everything was fine and that they were spiritually secure. Jeremiah saw that the people were kidding themselves and he feels that God should have taken away this delusion a lot earlier. He says: "*Ah, Sovereign Lord, how completely you have deceived this people . . .*" [4:10]. This is Jeremiah protesting against God.

In chapter 10: 23ff we have Jeremiah praying to God that when He punishes His people that He may not be too hard on them, for they are just weak and easily tempted. The pagan nations also carry blame for they caused Israel to sin. Here too we see Jeremiah the man pleading with God to show some consideration for the weakness of His people when He executes His judgment.

At other times Jeremiah was appalled by the indifference of the people to God and how they blatantly continue on in their evil ways. Then He appeals to God to correct them and he brings the word of the Lord that came to him with all his heart.

The Lord Jesus also knew of this struggle. In the Garden of Gethsemane He struggled as a human being, fearing that the deep suffering about to engulf Him was too much. He prayed to His heavenly Father that He may not have to suffer. Yet, Jesus knew that what His heavenly Father was about to do was the only way to save sinners and He willingly submitted Himself to His Father's will.

We ourselves may also know this tension between what we would like and what God wants to see in us. Sometimes, in certain situations, we would like to say something different to what we know God's Word wants us to say. It's a struggle between what we are as people, what we as people feel like saying and doing, and what we as Christians must say, obey and do the will of God as revealed to us in His Word.

Of course, we are not prophets like Jeremiah, and the word of the Lord will not come to us in the same manner as it came to Old and New Testament prophets. We receive the Word of the Lord only through the Scriptures. The Spirit of the Lord even leads and directs us. But with the church possessing the complete Scriptures, there is no evidence that personal visions, revelations, or words of the Lord are still given or needed.

But that does not mean that Jeremiah's struggle is totally foreign to us. Look, for instance, at Jeremiah's conflict when God said he was to announce the downfall of nations and kingdoms, including God's own people Israel. That made him a prophet of doom. "*Today I appoint you,*" said God, "*to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow*" [vs.10].

To '*uproot*' or '*root out*'; to "*tear down . . . destroy and overthrow.*" God was not referring to gardens or buildings but to His people Israel. Wrong things among them had to be dug up and removed. Their beliefs and hopes in false religions had to be torn down and destroyed. Jeremiah passed on all these words of doom from God. He did it, in obedience to God, but it was hard for him.

But God made Jeremiah more than just a prophet of doom. He was also to announce restoration, a return to the Lord in repentance and humility. God also appointed him to "*build and to plant.*" So after the uprooting there was to be a planting and after the tearing down there was to be a rebuilding.

Yet inevitably, with the uprooting, tearing down, destruction and overthrowing, there would be suffering, grief and sorrow. Jeremiah had to give word-pictures from God in graphic detail. The scenes he had to describe of deportation and captivity were like the pictures we see on television of columns of refugees being forced out of their own country and soldiers beating defenceless civilians. Jeremiah was well aware of Israel's sins and he knew how deserving of punishment the guilty were. But it grieved him that these people, who were in covenant partnership with God, had let go of God. There could have been so many blessings. But there were none. There was disobedience and people were not being saved any more because they did not want to be saved by God.

It affected Jeremiah so deeply that he sometimes wished he had not been born. He pitied his mother that she had given birth to him whom all the people hated and cursed [15:10]. A mother suffers too when her son is so unpopular that everyone is critical of him. Even his friends were just waiting for Jeremiah to slip up so that they could report him and have their revenge [20:10]. His task was so difficult. Many times Jeremiah wanted to pray for the safety of his people, to plead for them, to petition God on their behalf. But God told Jeremiah a number of times not to do this, God was not going to listen to such prayers, because Israel was not willing to break with her sinful ways [7:16; 11:14; 14:11].

So when Jeremiah obeyed the Word of the Lord and prophesied judgment, then his heart was filled with grief. Of course, nobody likes hearing messages of doom and destruction, and that's why the Israelites turned against Jeremiah and shunned him. So for all his concern and love for his people Jeremiah became a lonely man.

To make matters worse, there were false prophets, like Hananiah, who spoke only of peace and wellbeing, and Jeremiah, whose messages were quite different, experienced the ridicule of these false prophets [ch.28]. And when the Word of the Lord told Jeremiah to prophesy the destruction of the temple, then he copped the hate of his fellow priests as well.

The Word of the Lord also required that Jeremiah advise the people to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar's armies and to seek the peace of the invaders. When his fellow Israelites heard him say this then they saw him as a traitor of the worst kind. They were so disgusted with Jeremiah that they wanted him dead. It didn't happen, the Lord protected Jeremiah's life. But there were other times when he was beaten and imprisoned in a dungeon where he remained for a long time [37:15,16]. The king, Zedekiah, got him out because he was worried and privately he asked Jeremiah if there was a word from the Lord. "*Yes*", said Jeremiah, "*you will be handed over to the king of Babylon*" [37:17]. Then some officials ganged up against Jeremiah and had lowered into a well where Jeremiah sank into the mud. He would have slowly died there were it not for a foreign official at the king's court. He got permission to get him out. But you can see now why Jeremiah had times in which he wished he hadn't been born.

How Jeremiah wished at times that he could speak as a patriot, as a fellow Israelite, as a nationalist. Then his words would have been quite different. But God made him say His Word and Jeremiah knew that the word of the Lord is always true and right. God knew what He was doing. The Lord was not going to totally desert His people. Through punishment and discipline God was working repentance and obedience in the hearts of His covenant people.

So God was not without feeling either as regards His people. The Lord also grieved over the spiritual condition of His people. His words sound the same as the words of Jeremiah: *“Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wounds of my people? Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.”* [8:21:-9:1]. One would think that those words were Jeremiah’s words, but no, they were the Word of the Lord.

Yes, the words of Jeremiah and the Word of the Lord. Like Jeremiah, you can be on fire for the Lord, burning with a passion to do the Lord’s will and see His will done. Like Jeremiah, you can be disappointed when there are people in the congregation who fail to give a response to God. Like Jeremiah, the work of the office-bearers can be difficult. Deacons, elders, preachers, teachers and leaders in the congregation know so well that they must also do what God told Jeremiah to do – to uproot and plant, to tear down and build up. In the Lord’s church wrong things have to be uprooted and good things have to be planted. Unbiblical teachings and practices are to be overthrown and biblical ideas and activities have to be built up. There are times of concern and worry, and times of joy and happiness. Like Jeremiah, the workers in the church sometimes want to give up but at other times they are bursting with enthusiasm. Jeremiah had days he did not want to be among the people, but there were also days that he could not hold the Word of the Lord inside him. It had to come out, he had to speak up. He said: *“the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot”* [20:8-9].

Emotions, tension and struggles within. Who among us in God’s struggling church does not know about them! Not everyone is aware that you have them and not everyone needs to know that you have them. The Lord encourages us to carry each other’s burdens but you have to be careful how you do that, when you do it and to whom. If one’s words are always about burdens and struggles then soon you become known as another Jeremiah and his lamentations. It’s no good to always uproot and tear down, among the Lord’s people there must also be planting and building up.

The words of Jeremiah and the Word of the Lord that came to him. The words of you and me and the Word of God that comes to us through the Scriptures. We sometimes struggle as to which one we allow to come out on top. For there can be that conflict within us between our sinful human nature and the nature of Christ living in us. The tension between I, the individual person, and I, the Christian. Who is going to speak? My words or the Word of the Lord from the Scriptures? My gut feelings or the Spirit of God living in me?

It was for the good of Jeremiah that he as the prophet of God was not overcome by Jeremiah the man, but that the human part in him was overcome by Jeremiah the prophet. The prophet of God did not give in to the person, but the person gave way to the prophet. God’s Word to Jeremiah was more precious to him than his personal wishes. In the conflict between Jeremiah the man and Jeremiah the prophet, the prophet came out on top because he had seen God who revealed Himself to him.

Thus in Jeremiah we see the fruit of a truly sanctified life. As he experiences God and His Word, then the glory of an earthly Jerusalem and the rights of Israel as a nation, and whatever personal aspirations Jeremiah might have had for them, become second-rate to him. For Jeremiah, God became His greatest love and when it is like that with us then we are truly sanctified.

The fact that the Word of the Lord began more and more to rule over the words of Jeremiah also explains why Jeremiah remained faithful to God and to his prophetic task. From the information the book Jeremiah provides we know Jeremiah was a prophet for about forty years. I remember a minister who had completed forty years of ministry and there was a gathering of colleagues, friends and fellow church members. The Bible was read, there was some singing, people talked together, a few gave a little speech and the pleasant evening was closed with prayer. Jeremiah’s fortieth anniversary as a prophet of God was spent in prison where his fellow Israelites had put him because of his faithful admonishments and warnings.

And when Israel was being carried off into exile, a high commander in Nebuchadnezzar's army gave Jeremiah a choice. He was welcome to receive a personal escort to Babylon and be well looked after, or to stay behind in Israel in the company of a few poor people, who were left behind to prevent the country from going wild. Jeremiah decided to stay. But it did not give him much joy for some of these leftover Israelites dragged him off to Egypt in search of a better life. And there he died. Tradition has it that in Egypt Jeremiah was stoned to death, at the time he was nearing his fiftieth anniversary as a prophet of God.

Hundreds of years later the leaders in Israel tried to kill the Lord Jesus Christ who was the greatest Prophet of all. The Lord rebuked them and said they were like their predecessors who had treated God's prophets shamefully and stoning some to death. They were prophets in whom the Word of the Lord triumphed and who remained faithful even unto death. It was like that with the Lord Jesus too.

The question facing us is this: does the Word of God come out on top in our life? Every Christian, and certainly those of us who are office-bearers and others who have that extra responsibility and who will have to give account, will experience a tension between just being our self and being a Christian prophet. This struggle within is about who will rule us – our own words, ideas, desires and wishes, or God's Word? Our will or God's will? Remember that time that you went up to someone and gave him or her a piece of your mind. Now were those your words or God's Word?

All Christians are called to be prophets. This has nothing to do with fanciful and imagined visions and revelations. But it has everything to do with confessing faithfully and truthfully the Word of God as revealed to us in the Scriptures. It is to profess and honour the Lord above everything else, including ourselves. Our own little selves and our own little wills, which so often demand so much attention and want to be seen as being important, will have to give way to the all-encompassing Word of God. As prophets of God we must time and again let the Word of God rule our lives and our own words will have to play second fiddle.

It does not mean that we all become the same and lose our individual personality. But it does mean that we don't allow our personality to become king instead of Christ. We have to come to that point time and again where we rather kill off our personal wishes and desires than to have God's name dishonoured and His will put to the side. We rather have the Lord's work go on unhindered, than to see the wellbeing of His church threatened by some action of our own for personal gain.

Yes, the Spirit of God leads and guides us. The Spirit has been given to all Christians and office bearers are especially blessed to know that the Spirit of Christ enables them to do their task. The Spirit has no work of His own. His work is to let Christ live in us and speak through us. It means that we must not resist the work of the Spirit. When the Bible tells us not to do that, then it is really the same as telling us to let God's Word triumph over our words.

Blessed is he in whom the Spirit of God subdues the human spirit so that God's Word triumphs over the word of man. Happy is he in whom the human self loses out to the Christian prophet within. The Spirit of God seeks to silence the proud, selfish, ambitious and stubborn self to the point where only the Word of God is heard. Yes, where and when only God speaks and all are silent before Him, or where the human words blend in perfectly with God's Word, then there will come the peace that passes all understanding. When all personal thoughts and words have been made to harmonise with God's Word, then there will be no more tension. Then all inner conflicts will cease. It will happen when heaven comes on earth at Christ's coming. Until then, we pray continuously: Lord, let my words become your Word. Amen.

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Gosnells, 15/8/04