

THE CHALLENGE OF JEREMIAH

Jeremiah – the man

Jeremiah was called at a young age to his work, and he had a long ministry. To him fell the responsibility of interpreting difficult times for Judah. The pressure was on the Nation from great world powers, especially Babylon, and true religion was at a very low ebb. His task was to explain to the people that the coming of Babylon was the judgment of God on the godless Nation, and that nothing could turn back the Babylonians. He encouraged the people to join the Babylonian side, prophesying that the people who did this would be safe. He encouraged those who were taken in the first exile to remain in Babylon, because this was the will of God. He criticised false religion and false prophecy, and as a consequence lived in great danger of his life. Finally the very people he had tried to warn accused him of bringing about their downfall, and forced him to run away from the Babylonians to Egypt.

The challenges

“I know O Lord, that a man’s life is not his own; it is not for a man to direct his steps.” (10:23)

One of the hardest lessons a prophet has to learn is that he has no rights. He cannot choose where to go, when to go or what to say. These things are given to him by the Lord. I’m not saying that a prophet must sit in his watchtower, until he gets a divine revelation. Such revelation as he receives comes from study of the Bible, prayer, worship and in the course of his daily life. God has given the human body a brain, and with it we must weigh and test what we see and hear, and by the grace of God try to discern the signs of the times. The prophet is actively involved with God in sharing and delivering the word he has received. But in the end, we are servants, messengers of God, available to do his will when he decides, in the way he decides and in the place he decides.

***THE CHALLENGE:- We do not go to those who invite us,
but to those to whom we are sent.***

This is basic Christian discipline, and looks easy in writing. But it is not always so easy to do. Why?

**We often want to go to those who we know will receive us.
We often go to those who we know will give us a good offering.
We often avoid those that we know will give us a hard time.**

**We often avoid those we consider could not understand our message.
We often go for the easy and comfortable path.**

It takes great discipline and determination to accept Jeremiah's challenge – to let the Lord direct our steps. Yet if we do not, our ministry will always be weak and ineffective. We can only function properly in the place of God's choosing, at the time of God's choosing.

“Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said ‘We will not walk in it.’” (6:16)

The mission of the true prophet is never easy. Again and again the prophet is up against the stubborn and disobedient hearts which are often in the people of God. So when he speaks what appears to be a simple word, as did the prophet Jeremiah in this verse, the willfulness and disobedience rise up against him. This is not easy to live with, but unless the prophet can face and endure this, he will never reach the full potential of his ministry.

When I began as a prophet, I did not expect to face so much hostility and rejection. I was, after all, merely passing on what God had said to me. But like Jeremiah, I soon discovered how willful and how spiteful God's people can be towards the messenger. I have had to come to terms with this, and accept it. It has hurt me many times, and will many times more. One occasion, when I was put out of a Church, God said to me “remember prophet, it is me they are rejecting not you. It is me they are hurting, not you. It is my message they will not receive, not yours.” I have found this helpful to remember as my ministry has progressed. But when God is hurt, the prophet is also hurt. When God is rejected, it is almost impossible for a prophet not to feel rejected. When we see the tender heart of God, and the arrogant heart of his people, it is not easy for us.

**THE CHALLENGE – To accept the rejection, as part of
our calling, and not to take it personally.**

“I have made you a tester of metals, and my people are the ore, that you may observe and test their ways.” (6:27)

One day I was walking around the town where I live, when a member of a Church came up to me, and we walked together for a while. “You challenge me” he said. I

hadn't said a word, so I asked what he meant. "It's who you are, what you do, the way you live – these things make me uncomfortable."

I was prophesying in a meeting once, and afterwards my friend, who was travelling with me as my helper said "You make me afraid sometimes." I asked him what he meant and he replied "Can't you see? After all that you have said tonight, I'm nervous. I don't know what you know!" Mary and I were having dinner with some friends once, and they wanted to show us the plans they had for their new house. "But what's wrong with this house you live in now?" Mary asked. "Nothing. We just want a bigger and better one." Then they began to show us their plans. Every time they showed us another amazing feature of the house Mary would say "When we are in Africa..." or "Africans live very simply" or "It's tough to be ill in Africa – medicine is expensive." By the end of the evening, they were very uncomfortable. They had chosen to show their plans for their expensive new house to two people who don't have the slightest interest in houses or money –only in serving God.

A prophet is a tester of metals, and God's people are the ore. We live as God has told us to live, we see what God allows us to see and we speak as God allows us to speak. Often these things conflict with the way that the people of God are living and thinking. Our task is to be the tester of the metal – to show by our lives and our ministry what God expects, and what the people are doing. Do not expect to be thanked for this! God's people do not want to be tested. They want to be comfortable, to do things their way, and they so easily convince themselves that they are right. A prophet is a man from the desert places. He can only live God's way, in purity and holiness, with no room for compromise. These two ways clash, and bring trouble to the prophet.

We must ignore the pain of this. God wants pure metal – he wants gold. We must be ready to show the quality of the ore of the people of God. If we stray from this position, because it is too uncomfortable, we are on the path which leads to false prophecy.

THE CHALLENGE:- Is your life pure? Are you, by your lifestyle, being a tester of metals?

**"Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them."
(15:19)**

The people of God are constantly trying to compromise a prophet. They want a prophet to be less clear cut, to be willing to compromise a little, to be easier on the people of God. Once they succeed in doing this, the prophet is useless to them - but

that is what they want. They want to compromise us, so that they can get away with being impure, unholy, poorly disciplined. There is nothing worse than wanting to have an easy life, while the prophet is constantly demanding higher and higher standards.

But the Bible is clear – it is not the prophet who has to change, but God’s people. There is no room for the prophet to change. His calling will not allow him to compromise, to speak easy and comfortable things and make the way easy. He cannot change, and he must not. The people of God have to come to him, and examine their lives in the light of the truth he is trying to share. Of course this does not mean that a prophet has to walk around in arrogance, expecting the people of God to bow down to him. A prophet is also called on to have a servant heart, and from this heart he speaks his message, and to this message the people come.

It’s hard for the people to believe in this verse, but even harder for the prophet. He longs that the people will love and welcome him; he longs that they will hear the word of the Lord through him, and he longs to be part of them. His humanity is crying out for acceptance. In this agony, it is so easy for a prophet to lose his focus, and to go after the people of God. But he cannot, and because he cannot, he is condemned to a life of loneliness, rejection, hatred, ridicule and even death.

THE CHALLENGE:- Are you prepared for the life of loneliness which your calling will bring on you? Or are you too ready to compromise?

“I the Lord search the heart...” (17:10)

This challenge has to go with the one above, and in the first place should be directed towards the prophet himself. It might read “I the Lord search *your* heart.” Some prophets seem to think that the word they receive from God is independent of their own lives and attitudes. Nothing could be further from the truth. The destination of any word from God is first into the heart and mind of the prophet. That heart has to be examined first, before the word reaches out to anybody else. This is why I believe a prophet should long for the servant heart, which will allow God access without the barrier of arrogance or pride. The prophet who will not let his heart be examined is in serious trouble. He soon strays into arrogance, pride and foolishness. Those who listen to him might not know this – we are very good at disguising our own motives – and so arrogant and false prophecy begins to take root in the body of Christ.

Jeremiah challenges us to allow God to examine us, and to take away anything which is not from Him. We – God’s prophets – have to be the first to confess and repent. This is the only position from which we can challenge others with the word

of God. If confession and repentance are not part of our lives, I do not believe that it is possible to be a true prophet from God. This is a hard thing to write, but I believe we must maintain the highest standards of prophecy in the body. An unconfessing and unrepenting prophet is a poor example to the body, and should not be tolerated.

THE CHALLENGE:- Is confession and repentance a part of your daily life and experience?

“Heal me O Lord and I shall be healed, save me and I shall be saved, for you are the one I praise.” (17:14)

This is a tremendous challenge to the personal life of a prophet. So often we spend so much of our time listening, praying and sharing, that we forget our own needs. Not only does God examine our hearts, that we might confess and repent, He also wants to release in us his healing power. We need to know our sicknesses, and we need to seek His healing for those sicknesses. Why? So that we can know the power of His salvation, and have the release of the spirit of praise.

Again and again I come across prophets who have faithful ministries, but they lack the sense of the presence of God. Their words are good, but I do not feel the moving of the spirit of God for healing and praise in their lives. Yet of all the ministries, ours is in desperate need of the healing, saving and praising power of God. This transforms our words from being God’s words, to being God’s living words.

Prophets must be constantly seeking their own healing, their own experience of salvation, and their own desire to worship. We must look more to God, and less to the words we bring, or the people who hear them. We must be soaked in the salvation and praise of God. We must be filled with the healing power of God. We must be longing for more and more of God’s healing in our own lives. If we accept this challenge, then our words are sparkling, power filled, joy to the hearers and ministry to the heart of God. However hard we have to be, people will recognise in our ministries the life giving power of God. Without it, we quickly become a banging gong, or a sounding cymbal. (1 Cor.13:1)

THE CHALLENGE:- Are there areas of your life which are not healed? What are you going to do about it?

“This man should be sentenced to death, because he has prophesied against this city.” (26:11)

A prophet must not take any account of men. I’m not saying that we have a licence to be rude or arrogant, or that we should not be willing to take advice. But when we

come to our ministry, we are answerable to God. This is our only safe place, our only security and our only hope. Men threatened the life of Jeremiah, and they will threaten us. I have lost count of the number of times I have been ridiculed, insulted, ignored, rejected, and put out of places. I have lost count of the number of times powerful and influential men have ignored or insulted me. Men who could have furthered my work have brushed me off as if I were rubbish. On many occasions I have been left standing outside the city wall with no help, no comfort and no food. So what? This is part of the cost of my calling. Men are able to ignore me, but if I truly speak for God, they will have to answer for what they have done. If I did not speak for God, then they have done what is right —they have protected the flock from false prophecy.

The problem is this—many prophets cannot make this distinction. They don't like being rejected—they want to be liked. None of us like being made to look foolish or of no account. So, in order to be liked, we soften our message, or hold back when we know we should speak. This is especially difficult for those men who live by their ministry. Many of us have families to feed and clothe, and costs to pay. We know that if we say certain things, the Church will not give us the money or food we need to live. This has been a reality for me, and I share it to encourage others who are in the prophetic calling. But we serve a different master, who expects us to say what He wants us to say, when He wants it said and in the way He wants it said, regardless of personal consequences. We have to have courage.

THE CHALLENGE:- Despised and rejected. Is this is our life? Can you stand this? If not, you must either leave the Ministry, or seek God for more strength.

“In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died.” (28:17)

It's so easy for the people of God to treat prophecy lightly. Words are given, but they are seldom recorded, not given enough prayer or testing, and are quickly forgotten. The prophet finds this very hard to bear. The prophetic word is his life, and when the word is treated in a poor way, his heart is hurt. I remember going to one Church, and sharing a prophetic word. But the leaders were not interested, and the people hardly bothered to listen. In my prayers that night, I saw the Lord, and I held out the word he had given me to share. “Here Lord” I said “ I have to return this to you. I couldn't find anyone to receive it.” The Lord took back the word, and I saw tears running down his face. I didn't know what to say.

But if a prophet speaks a true word from God, it has power to fulfill what it speaks.

Hananiah thought he could take on the living word of God in the mouth of Jeremiah, and for two months he seemed to have been successful. But then the word fulfilled itself in a terrifying way. The Church of God may treat prophecy and prophets lightly, but we carry in our words a terrifying power. This is a powerful challenge to us and to the Church. To us—we must be very careful what we say and how we say it. The Church must be careful not to ignore us, or to ridicule us. To do so could have very serious consequences.

THE CHALLENGE:- Great power in prophecy – do you treat it with great care?

“I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord. “ plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (29:11)

Much of the ministry of a prophet can be critical of the people of God. This is natural – prophets are looking for purity in the bride of Christ, and will never rest while they can see impurity. The Church needs this constant challenge to move towards perfection. This growing maturity and purity are the preparations for the return of the bridegroom. But prophets must accept the challenge not to be too gloomy! Our task is to build up the body of Christ. God has plans to bless, to encourage, to prosper, to lead his people, whom he loves forward into his purposes. We must accept the challenge to be positive, to look for good things and to seek opportunities to bless.

Sometimes I hear prophetic words which are all negative and totally judgmental. This is not a right biblical balance. Jeremiah knew it, and so must we. Almost all prophecy begins with a positive comment, and ends with a blessing. We must seek to copy this pattern. Our task is to rebuke, encourage and build up the body. Let's make sure we are doing just this – and all of this.

THE CHALLENGE:- “The joy of the Lord is my strength.” Is this true for you?

“This is how Jerusalem was taken..” (39:1)

In the Old Testament, a prophet was considered to be a true prophet if his words came true. In the New Testament, different tests apply. A prophet is considered to be a prophet if he shares the heart of God and allows it to be tested. If the leaders of God's people consider his word to be from God, in line with the Scriptures, and part of God's plan for his people, then he is a true prophet. I have never believed that

“coming true” is the only test of a New Testament prophecy. However, it is an ingredient in a prophet’s ministry. It is good and upbuilding for himself and the body of Christ if on some occasions, it is testified by others that his word has come true.

I was to speak at a Church famous for its music. During the worship, the musicians were really good, the choir excellent, and I really enjoyed what they had to offer. But as the worship proceeded, God spoke to me. “This worship is not acceptable to me. It is too full of the ways of men, not of the glory of God. Tell them this.” I was very nervous, because I knew that this would bring trouble to me, but when I stood up, I said “The worship in this Church is not acceptable to God. It is full of the things of men.” The leaders were unhappy, and after the service they called me to their office and asked me what I thought I was doing. Up to them I had been nervous, but then I became angry. “I was speaking what God said to me” I replied. “You should not be attacking me, but seeking God and testing what I have said to you.” But they were very annoyed, and I got the impression that they would never invite me again. One year later, I received a letter from the Pastor. It said quite simply “Everything you said has been proved to be true!”

THE CHALLENGE:- Do not look to words coming true. That is God’s business. Rather, look to be confident that what you say is from God.

“When Jeremiah finished telling the people all the words of the Lord their God – Azariah son of Hoshai and Johanan son of Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah “You are lying!” (43:1-2)

Jeremiah had a very good record in prophecy. He had consistently told the people that Babylon would attack and destroy Jerusalem, and that is exactly what had happened. He had never wavered in his prophecy, and sadly it had come true. But this was not enough for the people. When Jeremiah warned them about the danger of going down to Egypt, despite his excellent record, they replied to him “You are lying.”

Jeremiah could easily have spoken angry words, but he did not. He could have refused to go with them to Egypt, but he did not. He could have become bitter and negative, but he did not. He allowed them to criticise him, he stayed with them as they went to Egypt, and he continued to try and make them see the foolishness of disobeying the Lord their God.

THE CHALLENGE:-

This last challenge is one of the most painful and one of the most powerful. A true prophet does not abandon the people of God, however foolish they may be. He stays with the family of God, even though he has been rejected and beaten down. If he leaves, then they are much weaker. He doesn't want this to happen. So he pays the price, and fulfils his tough and challenging calling. His reward is never here on earth, but in heaven, where His Master sees his works, and rewards him.

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Visionworld27
Suite 2, Heffle Buildings
33a High Street
Heathfield
TN21 8NL

01435 868282
jimsmithghana@yahoo.co.uk

