“JEREMIAH, GOD’S MAN”
A Transparent Look at Genuine Spirituality
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Introduction

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was but a young man in his early twenties (Jer 1:6) — it happened in the thirteenth year of the reign of the young King Josiah in 626 BC, while the prophet still lived in the small town of Anathoth in the land of Benjamin (just three miles northeast of Jerusalem). It appears that Jeremiah remained in his native city until he was forced to leave in order to escape the persecution that had spread to his family by his fellow-townsmen (cf. Jer 11:21; 12:6)… he then took up residence in the walled city of Jerusalem, and probably assisted King Josiah in the “reformation” that was effected during his reign (cf. 2 Kg 23:1). The spiritual movement throughout the country ceased in 608 BC, however, when Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo by the Egyptians. The prophet Jeremiah grieved his death, and was once again reminded of the “divine judgments” that awaited the nation because of her sinfulness (cf. 2 Chrn 35:25); at this point Jeremiah was in his early forties. Not long after, one of Josiah’s sons, Jehoiakim, was placed on the throne as a vassal king by the king of Egypt (cf. 2 Kg 24:1; Jer 25:1); thus for a time the Egyptian party was dominant in Jerusalem. By contrast, the prophet Jeremiah appeared as the chief representative of the party that favored the supremacy of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) rather than the Egyptians as the only way of security and safety, and in doing so opened himself up to the suspicion of treachery. Consequently the corrupt priests and prophets brought him before civil authorities, and urged that capital punishment be given to him for his “threatening oracles” (cf. Jer 26). Due to the efforts of several princes in the Judean government who had endeavored to protect him, he escaped punishment for a time.

In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim, Jeremiah was commanded to write down the “predicted judgments” which had been given to him from the Lord; so he had his friend Baruch write them down as he articulated them, and then had Baruch read them publicly in the temple before handing them over to the King. When Jehoiakim read a few sections of it, he destroyed them and gave orders to immediately arrest Jeremiah & Baruch — again the Lord intervened and preserved them. At this point the King of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar) had already been taking control of the entire region, and after the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC (where Pharaoh Neco of Egypt was killed), he captured Jerusalem and took Jehoiakim prisoner — after reflecting upon what to do with him, he decided to appoint him as Judah’s vassal king (cf. 2 Kg 24:1; Jer 25:1). After three years of submission to Nebuchadnezzar, and being deluded by the Egyptian party in his court, he violated his oath of allegiance to Babylon, withheld his tribute, and rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. He had hoped to make himself entirely independent. This he did against the prophet Jeremiah’s earnest protestation. Just a short while later Jehoiakim’s reign came to an end (as predicted), and he was violently killed.

His eighteen year old son, King Jehoiachin, succeeded him on the throne, but only reigned for a few months — the Babylonians took him into captivity when they besieged Jerusalem as Jeremiah had predicted (cf. Jer 22:18-30; 37:7-8). Scripture tells us that Nebuchadnezzar took 10,000 men into captivity in Babylon in 597 BC, along with their wives and children (cf. 2 Kg 4:14-16); according to
historians, the total number of people taken to Babylon is estimated to have been about 40,000; at this juncture Jeremiah was about 55 years old. Nebuchadnezzar then appointed Jehoiachin’s twenty-one year old uncle King Zedekiah, to be Judah’s vassal ruler (cf. 2 Kg 24:17-18; 2 Chr 36:11), and he reigned for eleven years. His treacherous rebellion of intrigue against Babylon, however, brought about one final devastating invasion by the Chaldeans in 586 BC (cf. Jer 37:5-11; 34:21; Ezek 17:15-20); it was at this time that Nebuchadnezzar turned the entire city of Jerusalem and the temple into rubble. Jeremiah was about 65 years when Babylon demolished the holy city and the temple. Nebuchadnezzar reproached the vassal king for breaking his oath of allegiance to him by forming an alliance with Egypt (which was the equivalent of a declaration of enmity against Babylon); in doing so his sons were slain before his own eyes (insuring that he would have no heirs to the throne), and his own eyes were then thrust out, and he was taken to Babylon where he would die. The total number of people taken into captivity at this invasion were significantly less then eleven years earlier — probably between two and three thousand. It is interesting to note that King Zedekiah had preserved the life of Jeremiah on a couple of occasions against the vengeful desires of some of his princes (cf. Jer 37:15-21; 38:7-13). Zedekiah was the last king of Judah through the royal line of King David.

When King Nebuchadnezzar took over the city in 586 BC, he ordered that the 65 year old prophet be set free from his confinement in the court (cf. Jer 39:11-12); they also gave him the choice of either going to Babylon to be with the people in captivity, or remain in Jerusalem with the remnant that was left — he chose to remain in Jerusalem. Ultimately, the group that remained in Jerusalem refused to heed Jeremiah’s advice, and felt it was in their best interests to go to Egypt where they believed life would be better and safer. The people had actually accused Jeremiah of not acting in their best interests, but acting in the best interests of the Chaldeans (God’s appointed disciplinarians). Clearly the people had not bowed their knees before Jehovah God or placed their trust in His prophet, so they journeyed to Egypt and forced Jeremiah and Baruch to go with them (Jer 43:6-7). Throughout the rest of his life Jeremiah still sought to turn the people who had so long rebelled against the Lord back to Him (Jer 44). His writings give us no further information respecting his life, but it is probable that he died in his 70s in Egypt not many years later.

Jeremiah’s ministry extended over the last tragic “forty years” of the Judean kingdom to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (626-586 BC), and the subsequent deportations of its inhabitants to Babylon. The prophetic oracles of Jeremiah constitute a stern warning to Judah and its capital city Jerusalem, to abandon its idolatry and apostasy that they might escape the inevitable consequence — seventy-years of captivity in Babylon (cf. Jer 25:1-14). The prophet’s sermons were met with intense opposition from a society fanatically addicted to idolatry and wishful thinking. Nevertheless, the brave prophet Jeremiah discharged his ministry despite continual persecution and the danger of death. The intense “three-sided contest for world domination” between Assyria, Egypt and Babylon, form the contextual background of his prophetic career. Because he predicted the triumph of Babylon and the subsequent captivity of Judah, and repeatedly warned against forming a useless alliance with Egypt, he incurred almost universal disfavor; as such, a note of doom dominated his message. Against this dark background, passages setting forth Messianic hope are also clearly revealed in his prophecies; these great gleanings look forward to a better day (cf. Jer 23:5ff; 30:4-11; 31:31-34; 33:15-18) and point to the final restoration of Israel — such Messianic prophecies will be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom after the return of Christ (cf. Acts 1:7; 15:14-17; Rom 11:15-29).
One of the major questions believers ask is why so many people live meaningless, corrupt lives. The truth is, there is very little to admire today in the prominent people of our culture — we are more interested in celebrities than saints, people of the flesh than people of the Spirit, material well-being than spiritual well-being. The majority of people live without purpose, and amuse themselves with trivia, trash and evil, in order to appease their fleshly desires and find some level of worldly significance. Talk show hosts and journalists don’t interview people of faith and character — why? because they are strangely perceived as boring, inauthentic people. Very few people of integrity in our culture are admired. The prophet Jeremiah, however, was one such man: he lived a life of excellence and faith, rather than a life of self-esteem and personal achievement, because he was more interested in God than in himself. He was a man who lived life to the full, and there is not a hint of human pride or worldly success in his story. In short, Jeremiah lived life at its best and inspired others to also have a passion for a full life as well. *Society* tells us that we arrive at full humanness by gratifying the desires of our inner self; sadly, these desires have been a recipe for misery for the world’s vast population. *Scripture* tells us that fullness of life is not about the self-life and seeking our will, but about the God-life and seeking His will (cf. Mt 6:10, 26:39). In spite of what Scripture teaches, many believers continue to live the self-life. Jesus encouraged us to grow in excellence and live selflessly (cf. Mt 16:24-26) — Jeremiah was just such a person; he lived a robust life by faith. The truth is, the only way any one can live at their best is by living a life of radical faith in God. Every human being needs to be pushed to live life at its best, be awakened to the voice of the Lord in Scripture, and be shaken out of petty and trivial busywork. Millions of believers down through the ages have been encouraged to live a life of excellence through the word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Jeremiah.

**Prolific Messages Found in Jeremiah**

Biblical scholars and students of Scripture consider Jeremiah to be one of the foremost prophets in the Old Testament. He was the most autobiographical of all the prophets… we know more about him than any other OT prophet… yet this man of God is one of the most misunderstood of the great OT leaders, because his material is not presented in chronological order and demands a contextual understanding of what was going on (keep that in mind when cross-referencing the various passages). The claim has been made that it is not only the longest book in the Bible, but the most valuable book in the Old Testament. It provides invaluable light on the subject of the decline and fall of the kingdom of Judah, and has been a great influence on theological thinking down through the ages. Jeremiah’s ministry was carried out in a politically, socially, morally and spiritually chaotic era. Probably the outstanding emphasis of his ministry was “the priority of the spiritual over everything else” — he saw how secondary and temporal Judah’s faith really was; his overarching concern at all times was the condition of the individual heart (with that in mind, it is like he is speaking to the Christian world here in America). The glorious days of reformation under *King Hezekiah* and the prophet Isaiah in the eight-century BC, were eclipsed by the long fifty-five year ungodly reign of *King Manasseh*, who aligned himself with the powerful Assyrian monarchs, thus maintaining a syncretistic worship of false gods for his people; in this spiritual declension both priests and prophets alike were implicated. When Jeremiah began to preach, the godly *King Josiah* had begun his reforms to wipe out idolatry from his kingdom. Tragically, the people of Judah had already become so ungodly that they were no longer responsive to calls to return to God with all their hearts… yet in grace the Lord continued to plead with His people through Jeremiah.
Sad and despairing because of the rejection of his message, Jeremiah still loved and prayed for and agonized over the people... but because of the unfruitfulness of his ministry, at times he actually felt that God Himself had forsaken him, and even cursed the day of his birth. Because Jeremiah is so unlike any other OT prophet, and because his writings are so inextricably bound up with his own life and thought, the student of his prophecy must consider in depth the inner life and characteristics of this man of God — including his confessions, prayers and dialogues with the Lord. His fellowship with God was particularly deep and intimate. At times his interactions with God were so frank and transparent that many modern students of his book feel he borders on being irreverent and blasphemous. Jeremiah manifested a complete frankness with God, concealing from Him no emotional reaction or fear; he even questioned the Lord’s dealings with himself and others (cf. Jer 12:1; 15:10-18; 20:7). His life was a lonely and isolated life. In spite of his deep love for his people, he was divinely compelled to proclaim their suffering and national doom. At one period of his life Jeremiah had decided to resign his commission (cf. Jer 20:8-9), but the divine compulsion God had placed within him would not let him do it — God had promised to make him an iron pillar and a bronze wall (cf. Jer 1:18), and He did not default on His word. Nothing more reveals a man of God than his prayer life and conversations with the Lord. Jeremiah lived, worked, and wept in an atmosphere of prayer and openness before the Lord; in them Jeremiah stands in all his human frailty, his love for his people, and his utter devotion to the will and call of God. In the following pages are fifteen passages from his book that have spoken powerfully to believers down through the centuries. Much of the material was gleaned from Eugene Peterson’s book, “Run With The Horses,” as well as commentary notes by two of my seminary professors — Dr. Charles L. Feinberg and Dr. Ronald B. Allen — and the renowned Bible teacher William MacDonald and his thoughts in his commentary on Jeremiah. These four gentlemen have been wonderful role models and highly esteemed teachers to thousands of Bible students for the past sixty-plus years. Due to the fact I have strongly identified with many of Jeremiah’s passionate feelings and experiences down through the years in my own life, this particular study is probably the most profound one I have written to date (and I’ve written over 70 studies). Since it sheds light on a number of difficult issues with which the committed believer must come face to face with at some point on his spiritual journey, I cannot recommend it too highly for those of you who have seriously struggled with God’s divine appointment upon your life. So buckle-up, my friend — you’re in for a ride.

1. Competing with Horses

There is a significant passage in the book of Jeremiah regarding the prophet’s life when he was worn down by opposition and despondently absorbed in self-pity — he asks the Lord why He allows the wicked to prosper, and yet permits the righteous (like himself) to suffer… like the psalmtist Asaph did in Psalm 73. It was at this critical juncture that Jeremiah was ready to abandon God’s unique call upon his life, and then he heard the following reprimand from the Lord: “If you have run with men and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?” (cf. Jer 12:5). Basically, God told Jeremiah that life is difficult (especially when you’re committed to doing the Lord’s work), and asked him if he was going to throw in the towel at the first wave of opposition? Are you going to retreat when you discover that following My will for your life involves more than eating three meals a day and having a warm bed to sleep on at night? The fact was, the obstacles in his hometown were meager compared to those he would encounter before the kings of Judah & Babylon (the horses). The relatively peaceful setting of Anathoth,
with its minor opposition from treacherous family members, served to prepare Jeremiah to struggle against far greater antagonists. So Jeremiah, are you going to live cautiously or courageously? I have called you to pursue a life of righteousness and strive toward excellence. Obviously, it is easier to relax and embrace that which is not challenging… but I have called you to a life of purpose that is far beyond what you think you are capable of living, and have promised you the strength to fulfill your destiny. And now at the first sign of difficulty, you are ready to call it quits? If you are fatigued by relatively calm conditions, what will you do when severe antagonism comes your way? Jeremiah weighed the options and counted the cost, and his life became his answer — “I’ll run with the horses.” The goal for us as believers is to be like Christ (cf. Rom 8:29; 1 Jn 3:2) and to arrive at mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). For sixty years Jeremiah lived God’s call upon his life. The only thing more important to him than his own being was God’s being. Throughout his life he explored the reality of God and in the process grew and developed and matured as a believer.

2. God Knew Us Before He Made Us

The Lord told Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you and appointed you a prophet to the nations” (cf. Jer 1:5). The truth is, we are who we are because God formed us, not because of some ensuing action we may have taken since we became consciously alive to our own existence. Who do you think gave you all of the qualities you possess? be they physical, mental, emotional, social, material, and even your personality? God is the One who ultimately determined your DNA — none of it was simply a matter of chance (cf. Ps 139:13-16); to admit knowing anything about God and arrive at a contrary conclusion is nonsensical. For some diabolical reason, man like to think that he is a “self-made person;” that he is the product of his own genius. In addition to that, long before man ever got interested in the subject of God, before it ever crossed his mind that God might be important, God singled him out as important. This realization has a practical result — no longer do we need to run here and there for answers to life; instead we simply need to go to God who knows us and reveals to us the truth of who we really are — that’s why I have made the objective of the Bible Studies I teach here in Phoenix “explaining life as God defines it.” The fundamental mistake most believers make is that they begin with themselves rather than God. God is the center from which all life develops. Jeremiah was keenly aware that the call of God upon his life had been determined by God from before his conception. As God’s word became a living reality in his life, the prophet came to understand that God knew him and had called him (set him apart for His special service) to proclaim a critical message at a crucial point in his nation’s history. The word knew refers to an intimate knowledge that comes from personal relationship — God knew Jeremiah intimately before He birthed him into this world; don’t ask me “how” that is possible, that is simply the reality of what it means to be the Eternal God of the universe. If you really struggle with such thinking, do an extensive study on the essence of what it means to be “eternal” vs. “temporal.” Eugene Peterson says in his book, “Run With The Horses,” if we make our ego the center from which to plot the geometry of our lives, we will live eccentrically; i.e., we will make that which is not the center of the universe (ourselves), the center of it. The reality is, we are living in a world that is completely subordinate to the creative will of God (cf. Is 14:24; 46:10; 55:11; Ecc 3:11; Eph 1:11; 3:11; Rom 8:28ff), and we are to grow into the life He has planned for us (cf. Ps 139:16; Jer 29:11). Thus, in summary, our identity doesn’t begin with ourselves — it begins with God and what He thinks of us. Beloved, I am well aware how difficult a concept this is to wrap your mind around;
because of our temporal nature it is actually not fully possible for us to do so, but that does not negate the reality of it. It should please you to know that God is far bigger than your little IQ, because that my friend would be an awfully small God (cf. Is 55:8-11).

Jeremiah’s life didn’t start with himself — it started with God. The Lord told Jeremiah, “Before you were born I consecrated you” (i.e., I set you apart for My purposes) — he was chosen to be a combatant against evil for God, just as you and I are. Jeremiah could have conformed to the dull routine habits of his culture, but he chose not to. In the same way, we can either take up the life to which we have been consecrated or we can traitorously defect from it and live a life of self-centered infidelity. Incidentally, it is not like we don’t have choices to make in life, or that God will simply override our traitorous ways when we choose to live in a contrary manner — He has called us to an obedient life of faith (i.e., listening to Him and following His plan; cf. Heb 11:6; 1 Pet 1:2), and will reward each of us according to our level of cooperation with His will and the leading of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 3:8-15; Phil 2:12-13; 1 Tim 4:8). Essentially, God is out to win the world to Himself through love, and all of us as His children have been selected in the same way that Jeremiah was in eternity past, and have been set apart unto Him for His eternal purposes. If we would live well, it is necessary to see God’s hand upon our lives from all eternity; otherwise we will live feebly and blind to the glory that we are known, chosen and set apart by God for His purposes. In short, every believer has been called to live for Christ and others (cf. Mt 16:24-25; 22:36-39; Phil 1:21; 2:3-5); sadly, many believers choose to ignore their calling and selfishly live for themselves, as the people of Judah did. How does this spiritual reality apply to your life?

3. Don’t Plead Inadequacy When God Calls

God asked Jeremiah to do something he knew he couldn’t do, so he naturally refused. God had asked him to be a “prophet” — God’s spokesman in the world. First and foremost, a prophet is someone who is obsessed with God and His will in the world. The work of the prophet is to call people to live rightly… and he himself must reflect that righteousness. He is to let people know who God is, what He is like, and what He is doing. A prophet wakes people from their spiritual stupor and complacency so that they see the great and marvelous reason for their existence; hence, a prophet makes it difficult to continue living an empty, selfish life. No work is more important than persuasively presenting the eternal, invisible, living reality, God. But important or not, Jeremiah refused because he was not qualified, exclaiming, “Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a youth.” To which the Lord responded, “Do not say ‘I’m only a youth;’ for you shall go to those whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak… do not be afraid, for I am with you to deliver you.” Behold, I am making you this day an iron pillar and a bronze wall against the entire land and all its people” (Jer 1:6-8, 18). Most of us plead “inadequacy” when the task at hand appears to be far bigger than we are — “Lord, I am only a youth… a housewife… an educated layman.” Moses pleaded inadequacy saying, “Lord, I am not eloquent enough” (cf. Ex 4:10). The truth of the matter is, “in and of ourselves all of us are grossly inadequate;” the life God calls us to is simply too much for us — we aren’t smart enough, gifted enough, or strong enough. We are all men of flesh with very little love and very little faith, and often slip back into indolence and self-centered living. Jeremiah was highly aware of his inadequacy: “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt” (cf. Jer 17:9).
Ruthless honesty will always leave us shattered by our own inadequacy, because the world is a frightening place. There is an enormous gap between what we think we can do and what God calls us to do; our ideas are trivial, whereas God’s are grand. Though the excuses we make are understandable statements of fact, it is not our ability or how we feel about ourselves that qualify us, but what God decides about us. God does not send us into a dangerous and exciting life of faith because we are qualified — He chooses us in order to make us the people He wants us to be and equip us to do the work He wants us to do. Thus the Lord said to His servant Jeremiah: “I am making you a fortified city, an iron pillar, a bronze wall against the whole land and all its people; though they will fight against you, they will not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you!” (cf. Jer 1:18-19). Inwardly, Jeremiah was in great agony many times (he was often mocked, persecuted, and imprisoned), but he never swerved from his course. There was enormous pressure on him to quit and hide…but he never did. Jeremiah kept his grip on reality, never closing his eyes to the godless evil around him. In order to be equipped to be what God calls us to be in this world, we need to understand God and not overestimate evil; we must trust in His Word, and not trust in what we see (cf. 2 Cor 5:7). Though Jeremiah’s emotions often failed him, his faith always held fast.

4. Do Not Trust in Deceptive Words

Manasseh was the worst king the kingdom of Judah ever had; he was a thoroughly evil man presiding over a totally corrupt government. He reigned in Jerusalem for fifty-five years. He proliferated pagan worship that involved sexual orgies… he installed cult prostitutes, magicians, diviners, mediums and sorcerers… and one day burned his own son to death in a terrible ritual of witchcraft (cf. 2 Kg 21:6, 9). Jeremiah was born into this polluted society in 651 BC, just ten years before Manasseh died, and after his own son Amon was murdered just two years after becoming king (cf. Kg 21:19-26), his grandson Josiah was put on the throne at eight years of age in 639 BC. Somehow in this young boy king there was a miraculous innocence and uncorrupt spirit that God used to bring new life to the land. For fifty-seven years (696-639 BC) lust and violence and evil percolated into the streets and villages of the nation. When the boy king Josiah learned that the high priest Hilkiah had found a book of the Law by Moses (Deuteronomy) in the sanctuary of the Temple, he asked that it be read to him… and after hearing its teachings, he made a solemn covenant with Jehovah to institute radical reform throughout the land (cf. 2 Kg 22:8-23:3; 2 Chron 34:14-32). He started at the place of worship and cleansed the Temple. The young king’s response was swift and commanding. He now had in his possession a powerful document (the book of Deuteronomy) about the love of God and how He was to be worshipped… as well as clear definitions of what is right and what is wrong. Now that he knew what true worship was, he banished every vestige of false worship… and the people were taught the way of faith. It is amazing what happens when your heart is really “open” to the truth; when one really “desires” the truth.

Jeremiah was right in the middle of this reform — he participated in it with his preaching. He pleaded with the people: “Break up your fallow ground” (cf. Jer 4:3); but idolatry formed a tough crust that made people insensitive and unreceptive to the word of God. Plowing was a metaphor for repentance — it prepares the ground of our hearts to receive the message God has for us. Said Jeremiah, “Ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls” (cf. Jer 6:16) — these ancient paths lead to goodness and to God. It didn’t take Jeremiah long to realize that the reform was only skin-deep — outward changes had been enor-
mous, but inward changes were imperceptible. The throngs of people who gathered in the
temple were euphoric as they worshipped saying, “This is the temple of the LORD! the temple
of the LORD! the temple of the LORD!” Though they were saying the right words, the people’s
hearts were not right; they were simply using these words like a magical incantation. The words
were true but what the people inferred from them was entirely erroneous; the temple had become
a kind of fetish object of faith — they felt no harm would come to them because the temple was
God’s earthly abode. But this false hope was a lie (cf. Jer 3:23; 7:9; 8:8), thus Jeremiah thundered that
the temple without godliness was simply a delusion. A complete transformation of the people’s
ways and doings, lifestyle and beliefs, was necessary. Therefore, he exclaimed the word of the
Lord, “Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not merely
trust in these deceptive words!” (cf. Jer 7:1-4). Standing in a church singing a hymn doesn’t make
us holy; conversely, mere repetition of words is worthless. Appearances can be deceptive. Their
religious performance was impeccable, but their everyday lives were despicable. The outside is
a lot easier to reform than the inside… showing up in church once a week is a lot easier than en-
gaging in a life of daily prayer and Scripture meditation that develops into godly concerns and
ministries. Though the people celebrated Josiah’s reform, they ignored Jeremiah’s preaching.
Similarly, we live in a culture where image is everything and substance is nothing. It is interesting
to note, a little over 600 years later, Jesus used this same text in His “spring cleaning” temple
sermon (Mk 11:15-19). Likewise, Paul warned Timothy of those who were “holding to a form of
religion but denying the power of it” (cf. 2 Tim 3:5).

5. The Lesson of the Potter and the Clay

The Lord likens Himself to a “potter” and His people Israel (Judah) to a “vessel” He has made.
Due to the fact the vessel was not functioning the way God had designed it, He decided to spoil
it and remake it into a worthy vessel — this was the essence of a prophetic vision the Lord gave
to Jeremiah. The Lord commanded Jeremiah to “go down to the potter’s house, and there I
will speak to you.” So Jeremiah did as the Lord requested and when he got to the potter’s
house “he saw the potter working at his wheel… the vessel of clay he was making was spoiled
in his hand, and he then reworked it into another vessel, as seem good to him” (cf. Jer 18:1-4). In
the seventh-century BC the potter’s house was a fixture in every Hebrew community; the potter
was a craftsman whose activity was familiar to everyone, because his work was necessary for
the maintenance of everyday life. Thus the Lord showed the prophet what He was doing with
His people Israel — he saw God at work making people useful for His glory. God shapes us for
His eternal purposes. Jeremiah knew all about “spoiled vessels” — men and women with impur-
ities and blemishes that resist the shaping hand of the Creator. Jeremiah had other words for it:
sin, rebellion, self-will, idolatry, wandering, and complacency. As our heavenly potter, God
kneads and presses, and pushes and pulls as is necessary; He never gives up on His vessels or
throws away what is spoiled… He simply remakes it into worthy vessel.

The Lord’s word to the house of Israel was this — “Behold, like clay in the potter’s hand, so are
you in My hand” (Jer 18:10). “If you will turn from your evil ways, I will repent of the evil that I
intended to do to you” (Jer 18:8), “but if you continue to do evil and refuse to listen to My voice,
I will repent of the good I had intended to do to you” (cf. Jer 18:10). God’s message is twofold —
God was busy at work shaping their lives into that which is useful and beautiful; but should they
refuse to cooperate with Him, He will spoil the vessel and rework it into another vessel. So the
clay ultimately determines the action that the potter takes — the defects are in the clay, not the hand of the potter. Though God would use Babylon to turn Jerusalem and the temple into rubble, and suffer His people to go into captivity in exile… still He will never completely destroy them (cf. Deut 31:6; 8; Phil 1:6; Heb 13:5). This was one of Jeremiah’s most powerful sermons to the Jewish people. *The Lord subjects each of us to the potter’s wheel that He might shape our entire selves into something that is useful and beautiful*… and when we become unuseful and unlovely, He reworks our lives on the potter’s wheel — this can happen several times in the believer’s life — though it is a painful process, it is a very worthwhile process.

6. Self-Centered vs. God-Centered Living

Basically, people go to church to either enhance their “self-life” or improve their “God-life;” that is, they are either looking for a way to make life better and feel good about themselves… or to experience God’s salvation and rule over their lives. So one group sees religion as a way to live a happy life (nothing that interferes with their happiness will be tolerated), and the other group sees religion as a way for broken persons to become whole persons in relation to God (anything will be tolerated in order to deepen and extend that reality). Therefore people either live life with a “self-focus” (enhancing what they want), or a “God-focus” (becoming what God wants). These conflicting expectations are always in evidence in a person’s life. How do you measure your life — self-centered or God-centered? During Jeremiah’s lifetime the most popular preacher in Jerusalem was the chief overseer of the temple named Pashhur. He was a man of significant prominence who spoke enthusiastically, positively, affirmatively, and confidently… and when he stretched out his arms in blessing, everyone knew that they were included. His favorite word was peace… that everything was going to work out all right… that God was working out His purposes… and that He will ultimately bless all the people of the earth through them. His was an extremely positive message… but there was one man in Jerusalem who didn’t agree with Pashhur, and that was Jeremiah. In angry exasperation he cried out to him, “*From prophet to priest every one deals falsely, saying peace, peace, when there is no peace!*” (Jer 8:10-11). The task of a prophet is not to smooth things over but to make things right… likewise, the function of religion is not to make people “feel good” but to make them authentic, righteous creatures; and that means humble confession of sin and a deep commitment in faith.

Jeremiah’s task was to challenge the lies and speak the truth. Man’s problem is that he is always looking for an easy way — a shortcut — there is none. Essentially, man must be rescued from his despotic ego and his “self-centeredness,” and then turn to a life of “God-centeredness.” Jeremiah accused the people of going along with a religion that assured them of success in whatever they undertook, while at the same time they were abandoning the God who called them to live in love and faith. When he finished his short speech, he broke a pottery water jug he was holding by throwing it on the ground saying, “*Thus says the Lord: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended*” (cf. Jer 19:11). When Pashhur heard what Jeremiah had done, he had him arrested, beaten and put in stocks… Jeremiah yelled at him: “*Judgment is coming because of willful, selfish, entrenched sin, and all you do is sprinkle holy water on it. Babylon will invade this place and plunder everything and take you and the people captive… and the falseness of your preaching will be exposed!*” (cf. Jer 20:1-6). Soon after his arrest the people began chanting derisively against Jeremiah, thus making his pain even greater. Obviously, Jeremiah didn’t like it, and after he yelled at Pashhur, he yelled at God; he
was angry, hurt and bewildered because of all this was happening to him (cf. Jer 20:7-10). Though he didn’t like what he was experiencing, the most important thing in his life was still God — not comfort and ease — but the living God. Ultimately, he feared getting what he wanted and missing out on what God wanted. What a waste it would be to take these short, eternity-charged years that we are given and squander them with selfish living and trivial chatter.

Choosing a “God-centered life” is not an easy choice as everyone of us can attest, because it means “dying to the self-life.” Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life (i.e., live for himself) shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Mt 16:24-25). So being a disciple of Christ involves denying self, cross-bearing and following Him. It is important to remember this is the Creator’s revelation to His creatures… it is not something that one knows outside of divine revelation. Denying self ultimately means yielding to His control so completely that self no longer has any rights… taking up the cross daily means dying to sin and self and the world (death involves suffering)… and following Him means obeying Him and living as He lived with all that involves (humility, poverty, compassion, love and grace).

The Lord anticipates two hindrances to discipleship — the temptation to save oneself from discomfort, pain, loneliness, and loss; the other is the temptation to accrue earthly riches. Obviously, living a “self-centered life” means living a life that is not “Christ-centered.” On another occasion Jesus said, “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me… cannot be My disciple. For who among you when he wants to build a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?” (cf. Lk 14:27-28) — the principle is this: if a person doesn’t have what it takes to build it, he doesn’t proceed. By way of application, the emphasis is on “calculating what it costs to follow Christ,” because there indeed is a heavy price to pay — something most of the Christian churches in our country fail to preach. Calculating what it really costs to follow Christ is the responsibility of every believer. The question is — have you ever sat down and considered the cost of what it means to follow Christ? More than likely you’ve been a believer for a number of years now, and have come to the realization that you have lived in such a way that “your flesh!” (your sinful self) has impacted your “theology of thought” (i.e., what you have come to believe in practice — how you live and view life), and have found yourself lacking and wanting. That’s the spiritual road all of us as believers travel, and only after coming to the end of ourselves and realizing that there must be more to the Christian life than the way we have lived it and understand it, does the Lord then knock on the door of our heart and ask us if we have truly considered the fullness of what it costs to be His disciple. Scripture tells us that many of those who were following Christ during the days of His earthly ministry, carefully began to consider what it truly meant to be one of His followers, came to the conclusion that what Jesus was asking of them was simply too much and too difficult for them (cf. Jn 6:60), so they stopped following Him (cf. Jn 6:66). With this mass defection from the ranks of His followers, Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked them, “Will you also stop following Me?” to which Peter replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:67-68).

The teaching of the Lord Jesus proved so unacceptable to the majority of His followers, that they backed away from Him and chose to no longer associate with Him. Committed believers recognize that Christ alone has the words of eternal life, and that it is these words that matter more than anything else. Obviously, if eternal realities (i.e., the essence of what really is) are not of supreme importance to us, ultimately we will choose to live for ourselves and walk away from Christ. Yes it is true, what God asks of us is “very significant” — He is asking that we surrender
our entire selves to Him. All of us at some point in our pilgrimage of faith, will be confronted with the integrity of our faith in Christ and our level of commitment to Him. Being as our flesh demands a pleasant life of comfort, success and not being inconvenienced, we will ultimately have to reject those values if we are going to “make Christ our life.” Beloved, should you somehow argue to the contrary that this isn’t necessarily true, you are listening to the voice of Satan and your flesh, because complete submission to the will of God is the foundation of what it means to have a true life-changing relationship with Christ. For a number of years I used to think God was like a “porcupine,” because every time I seemed to get close to Him, He would hurt me, and I would question His love for me — “If you love me so much, why do You keep hurting me?” “What have I done that has offended You so much?” (a question the legalist repeatedly asks). “I gave you my life; why are You so mean to me?” Over the years it became painfully clear that my self-life was a far more significant reality to me than I thought it was. The truth is, pain and suffering were very difficult realities for me to accept; incidentally, they are the means God uses to perfect our faith. Surely, I thought, there must be an easier path than this — right? The primary question you will ultimately need an answer to in your own life is this: Why is suffering such an essential part of the Christian life? (read Jn 16:33; 2 Cor 4: 7-12, 16-18; Phil 3:10; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1-2, 13; 5:10).

My journey through the Scriptures, and my journey of faith have taught me that suffering is an integral part of the life of the committed believer. Why? Because it teaches us spiritual realities that can be learned in no other way. No matter how much you may think your faith is so unique and glorious that you can somehow skirt this issue — this is the truth — and until you accept it, you will defer to “the self-life.” The truth is, we don’t become aware of the depth of indwelling sin (i.e., the fullness of our flesh) until we have a few years under our spiritual belts — it simply does not happen when we are young bucks. Why? because we have experienced too many wonderful things in the initial stages of our spiritual growth, and our lives are simply moving too fast in all that life has to offer for us to stop and reflect upon spiritual realities that require the experience of deep inner pain for us to understand. It wasn’t until the apostle Paul, probably the greatest spiritual mind in the history of the world, had been serving in ministry for a number of years, that he finally came to the conclusion that “there was nothing good in his inner man whatsoever (i.e., his flesh)” (cf. Rom 7:18). This is the stark realization that the vast majority of saints finally came to after years of walking with Christ… that there is really nothing good in the old man within… that it is fully corrupt — though I believed and taught that biblical truth as a young man in ministry, the profound depth of that truth took years of spiritual stumbling for me to fully realize it. It is the destitute nature of one’s flesh that the believer must learn to contend throughout his life — this is the spiritual war that every one of us as God’s children must fight. Though the flesh is a prominent presence in our lives, the wonderful reality is God still reigns supreme within us — wherein sin abounds, grace does much more abound!

I don’t know why God chose to make suffering and persecution such an integral part of our lives as His children (but He did)... and it is the number one reason why believers struggle with their faith. My suggestion to those of you who still can’t accept it, is that you prayerfully immerse yourself in God’s Word until He removes the angst from your soul, and replaces it with His overwhelming peace. The reality is, we are temporal beings living in an eternal universe; i.e., we are extremely weak creatures (cf. Ps 103:14; Heb 4:15) living in God’s fallen universe, whom God has graciously redeemed and made eternally alive in His Son (cf. Rom 6:11; Eph 2:1, 5). As His children God has given us His Eternal Word (Scriptures), and has placed His Eternal Spirit (Holy Spirit) within us, to convey Eternal Truth (eternal realities) to us — without His Word or the Holy Spirit
it would not be possible to understand eternal truth (cf. 1 Cor 1:18; 2:14; Jn 14:17; 15:26). Therefore since we are God’s children indwelled by His Spirit, we now have the capacity to apprehend eternal truth and “walk in newness of life” (cf. Rom 6:4). Malcolm Muggeridge, the renowned twentieth-century Catholic journalist & author says in his book “A Twentieth Century Testimony” (Thomas Nelson, 1978, p.72) that he now looks back on the difficult experiences of his life [that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful] with particular satisfaction… that everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened his existence during his seventy-five years in this world, “has been through affliction and not through happiness.” The problem many believers have when they contrast the ideas of “the self-life” vs. “the God-life,” is that they open themselves up to Satan’s argument, that God is really not for them, but against them… that He is withholding things from them and is out to make their life miserable, not happy — such arguing completely ignores the redemptive love of God, and the sinful, corrupt, diabolical nature of “the self-life.” That’s why it is important for the believer to understand the eternal love that God has for him. It’s when we question God’s love for us (the very foundation of our faith) that we really struggle spiritually… but due to the presence of indwelling sin (our flesh), this is a common struggle for the believer — learning to “trust God” in the crucible of life is no easy matter; it will tax every ounce of your being. You simply need to know that “this is the crossroads” where the battle is ultimately won — the only way you can truly know the depths of God’s love for you is by experiencing the furnace of affliction and letting Him speak to you through His Word… and this requires that you saturate yourself in His Word; a diligent study of His Word is essential. One further note: if you don’t prayerfully meditate upon His Word you will not experience its enlightening work in your heart.

7. Jeremiah’s Interfacings with God

All of us have probably wondered about the “inner life” of the great saints of history, and what they were really like. Included among them would be the prophet Jeremiah. There are several conversations that Jeremiah had with the Lord in his book where he opens his heart for everyone of us to see. True prayer happens when we approach God at the very center of our lives, the very core of our being. Following are seven of the prophet’s interfacings with the Lord.

a. Transparent Intimacy — When we are transparent with the Lord, our prayers will reflect the deep intimacy of our relationship, and how important God is to us. The parody of prayer, however, is that as redeemed fallen human beings we are often “absorbed with ourselves” (i.e., with our moods, ideas, issues and interests), but that is not the case with Jeremiah; he tends to focus exclusively on the Lord. In Jeremiah’s confession of chapter 15, he is scared, lonely, hurt and angry: “Thou who knowest, O LORD, remember me… take vengeance for me against my persecutors” (Jer 15:15). Jeremiah was frightened and the recipient of physical beatings and imprisonment; obviously he didn’t like it, so he said to the Lord, “Know that for Thy sake I endure reproach (Jer 15:15)… for Thy sake I suffer abuse… don’t be so patient and lenient with my persecutors that they have time to destroy me!” God’s unhurried action on Jeremiah’s behalf was frustrating to him… he wanted vindication now, not in the future. Our compulsive timetables often collide with God’s leisurely providence. We tell God not only what to do but when to do it — though we take God seriously, we are inclined to take ourselves far more seriously.
b. Loneliness — Next, Jeremiah prays about his loneliness. Though the reformation work he was involved in with King Josiah was a heartfelt work, it was a lonely work — it meant years of solitude. The majority of the people went their way laughing and merrymaking, whereas Jeremiah went his way in lonely reflection, taking God’s word more seriously than any human word. Being highly preoccupied with the Word is not a matter of simply reading a few chapters a day; it requires hours of diligent study and meditation. When God’s Word is your vocation, you will find yourself spending a significant amount of time alone and reflecting upon what God has to say to you; this isn’t the life of the normal man of the cloth — he is understandably occupied with numerous other responsibilities. Jeremiah, having plunged into his ministry, found that no one was with him; he was completely alone. What could he do? Having acquired a taste for divine truth by reading the book of Deuteronomy that the high priest Hilkiah had discovered in the temple’s archives, he could no longer turn to a bland diet of senseless gossip and rumor. He said to the Lord, “Thy words were found and I ate them, and they became for me the joy and the delight of my heart… I did not sit in the company of merrymakers… rather, I sat alone, because Thy hand was upon me, for Thou didst fill me with indignation against the sins of my people” (cf. Jer 15:16-17); they bothered him deeply. Jeremiah’s isolation and indignation were the results of his obedience to the Word and God’s calling upon his life. The hand of God was upon him, and the constraint of God’s truth weighed on his spirit — remember, God was relentlessly at work in Jeremiah’s heart and mind and life; He would not let him rest. Few believers experience such overwhelming presence of God in their life.

c. Pain — The sinfulness of the people and the cruelty of the wicked caused a deep wound in Jeremiah’s heart. He was so deeply and continuously wounded that he wanted to know if God had abandoned him (“Why do I hurt so badly? Why is my pain so great?”)… the blasphemies of the people cut him… there was no resolution in sight… the only cure was for the people to repent and trust God. Jeremiah hurt because he really cared… and he cared because God had filled his heart with a deep compassion for his people. Thus Jeremiah cried out to the Lord — “Why is my pain unceasing and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” (Jer 15:18a). How difficult it must be to have such powerful convictions, and have the people be so unresponsive.

d. Anger — Jeremiah’s prayer intensifies; turning from his hurt, he now bursts forth in anger: “Wilt Thou indeed be to me like a deceptive brook with water that is unreliable?” (Jer 15:18b). The “deceptive brook” was a familiar figure to his people (Job 6:15-20). Earlier Jeremiah had preached that God was “the fountain of living waters” (Jer 2:13); now he accuses Him of being a “deceitful brook” — from a distance the water beds in the desert look as if they are flowing, but when you arrive at its banks it is dry; you find it to be nothing but a mirage. What the prophet is saying here is this: “You promised, but you didn’t deliver.” An even bolder accusation came later when he raged, “You lured me, Lord, and I let You; You overcame me and prevailed” (Jer 20:7); literally, he was saying, “You seduced me and then You raped me; You lured me with enticing words, then You seized me by force and made me submit to Your will.” Our anger is oftentimes a measure of our faith — as believers we argue with God; whereas unbelieving skeptics argue with each other. Believers always have the only Sovereign Transcendent Reality of the universe (GOD) as the One with whom they have to do, not some naysayer, popular opinion, psychic or astrologist. Everything Jeremiah experienced and thought about, he put in relationship to the living, all-knowing God of the universe; but God lets him know that he entertained wrong thoughts about Him, and expressed his anger toward Him because of those unworthy thoughts. Hence, He told Jeremiah that those thoughts must be purged, as one removes vile dross from precious metal (cf.
e. Repentance — After listening to Jeremiah’s frustrations and complaints, the Lord responded to his impassioned inquiry with a message of repentance and reassurance of his call: “If you will return I will restore you, and you shall stand before Me” (Jer 15:19a). The Lord responded to his inquiry (cf. Jer 15:15-18) and admonished him to “repent,” after which He would restore him to his prophetic position as His spokesman. The first requirement for a genuine, personal relationship with God is doing away with pretense; you must deal with reality as it is stated in God’s Word. Jeremiah’s prayer was not proper; he simply voiced what he felt (scared, lonely, hurt and angry); he was feeling sorry for himself. Though God felt Jeremiah’s pains (cf. Heb 4:15), He did not indulge in his self-pity… and just as Jeremiah was severe with the people, God was severe with Jeremiah: “Repent, Jeremiah, and stop nursing those kinds of feeling for they are destructive; then I will restore you and make you ready to serve again in My presence.” Does that mean we don’t experience such thoughts? No, not at all. We simply are being commanded to not let such thoughts ultimately control our perception of reality—we must wrestle with the truth until it fills our hearts and we experience God’s peace. Jeremiah had to undergo the refining process once again so that he could cleave to precious words, and not vile, worthless ones; he must reach out to his people with the truth, but not let them drag him down to their level. His only recourse was to trust God more fully and be faithful to the message God had called Him to preach… however the people may respond. Perhaps you are in a place today where you have come to the end of yourself and have let your flesh control your response. Like Jeremiah, you need to acknowledge it for what it is and repent, and let God restore you.

Take note of how understanding and compassionate the Lord is—He understands and even sympathizes with our inherent weaknesses as fallen human beings (cf. Heb 4:15), and doesn’t fully deal with us according to our own sinfulness (Ps 103:14). God was mindful that Jeremiah was but dust (Ps 103:14), just like we are. By way of application: Is that how you see the Lord when you come to the end of yourself? or do you see Him as a rigid despot who insists on making you pay for every ounce of wrongdoing? Is that how you respond to your children? Remember, you are God’s child, someone He loves so much He went to the cross to redeem that He might transform you into the image of His Son (cf. Rom 8:28-30)—that’s His goal for your life… though it is anything but easy, He will accomplish it! Are you aware of that? God is not your enemy, anymore than you are the enemy of your own children. He is not against you, but for you (cf. Rom 8:31). Again, “your perspective about God (how you really see Him) is tremendously important.” As believers we need to learn to humbly deal with our sin that we might receive yet another measure of God’s mercy and grace (cf. Rom 5:20; 2 Cor 9:8; Heb 4:15-16; Jam 4:6) — of which we are ever in need. Jeremiah the prophet discovered the wonderful truth that “it is new every morning” (Lam 3:22-23); living as though this isn’t true results in spiritual paralysis and darkness in the soul. Remember, all inward pain, anxiety and depressed living are the result of caving into fleshly thinking. Being as we each think over 30,000 thoughts a day, the vast majority of our thoughts are motivated by the flesh — whereas fleshly thoughts are natural, spiritual thoughts require intentionality; so sinful thinking obviously dominates a lot of what goes on in our minds. Paul tells us, “that which is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23) — that is, anything that does not align with godly thinking is sin. The reality is this, at some point on our journey of faith we must each learn to affirm the truths of Scripture — and the greatest among them is the truth that God really loves us!” And this we
do by prayerfully meditating on what Scripture teaches. That, my friend, is “faith” (cf. Rom 1:17; Heb 11:1).

f. Perseverance — God continued to instruct Jeremiah: “If you will extract the precious from the worthless, you will be My spokesman. And though the people may turn to you, you must not turn to them” (cf. Jer 15:19b). Jeremiah was understandably discouraged, because his words accomplished nothing. All he got for his dedication was persecution and reproach. God steps in and tells him to “Stick to your calling, and continue to be My mouth!” Jeremiah was concerned about what the people were saying, but that was not to be his concern — God was to be his concern. What is it you really want to do with your life? Please others or please God? By the way, the setting of priorities in life is not a once-for-all act — it needs to perseveringly be done over and over again. Circumstances change, moods change, but it is “God Himself” with whom we have to do… and “prayer” is that place where our priorities are re-established; it happens when we humbly converse with God.

g. Renewal — Jeremiah continues to listen to the Lord, and this is what he hears: “I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; and though they may fight against you, they will not prevail over you; for I am with you to save you and deliver you. I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked” (cf. Jer 15:20). Jeremiah was recommissioned with words similar to those of his original calling (cf. Jer 1:18-19). God would make him a fortified bronze wall; i.e., an impregnable fortified city with bronze walls that could not be destroyed. So Jeremiah’s God-designed defense system would not be knocked down or tunneled under by men and armies. Though the world would vehemently challenge and attack him (cf. Jer 11:18-23), the Word of God that spoke all things into existence would be His everlasting defense. It was through prayer that Jeremiah’s life and calling were renewed. Likewise, it is through prayer where your life and God’s unique calling are renewed. God promises His presence in times of opposition, persecution, and imprisonment for His sake. If you are truly open to that work God wants to do in and through your life, God assures you He will do that work (cf. Jn 3:21; 7:17; Ps 25:9, 14; Prov 3:32).

8. Walking Persistently with God

Those who regularly hike the hills and mountains have a slow, persistent, unhurried step… while inexperienced hikers energetically hurry along, and soon have to stop, exhausted from the climb. Baron Friedrich von Hugel in his book “Selected Letters” (edited by Bernard Holland, E.P. Dutton, 1933, pp. 305 and 266) says that one of the secrets of experiencing true growth in serving and loving God is to make your walk with Him a sure, slow, consistent one… and being willing to camp out for a few weeks in spiritual desolation, darkness and emptiness at different stages along the way. Why? because the journey is anything but comfortable and smooth and without significant challenges. The demand to minimize the cross and trial, says von Hugel, is simply folly and trifling. The prophet Jeremiah told the people that he had “spoken persistently to them for 23 years, but they refused to listen… turn now, every one of you, from your evil way and wrong doings” (cf. Jer 25:3-5). The Hebrew word “persistent” (hashkem) came to describe the activity of people who got up early before dawn and set out with a heavy burden on a long journey. For 23 years (626-603 BC) the people of Judah had sluggishly slept in and heard nothing, in spite of the fact the Word of the Lord was being presented to them (cf. Jer 7:13, 25-26; 11:7-8; 25:3-4; 29:19, 32:33; 35:14-15; 44:4). The Word was not only the center of Jeremiah’s book, it was the center of his life; as such, he suffered an
enormous amount of abuse during those 23 years. Every day he diligently got up before the sun rose to listen to God’s Word and then speak His Word; this was the secret of his persevering pilgrimage. How would you like to study and prepare a sermon every morning, and then go out and preach it? Let me remind you, Jeremiah’s sermons were not just a bunch of pabulum. Disciplined steadfastness is the key to spiritual growth and fruitful ministry. Jeremiah lived the prophetic life and was committed to God’s purpose for him; his life added up to a life of amazing stamina… even though he was frustrated at times, he persisted in his calling. The Lord had sent numerous other prophets such as Habakkuk and Zephaniah (cf. Jer 26:20), who also persistently proclaimed the message of repentance so that the nation might remain in the land (cf. Jer 25:4-5). Security, prosperity, and long life in the land were directly related to the nation’s covenant faithfulness to God (cf. Deut 28-29).

Jeremiah’s persistent faithfulness contrasts with the erratic and impulsive nature of the people with whom he lived; though the peoples lives were full of projects, nothing of significance was ever accomplished. Israel had a long history of “unfaithfulness.” Every attractively packaged promise distracted her from God… for centuries she pursued one lover after another… she was a spiritual adulterer… her actions developed out of her fleshly fantasies and had no basis at all in reality. Jeremiah essentially told her: “Assyria never cared for you… Egypt never cared for you… but God has always cared for you, and He will not let the people He created for His own glory live such empty, silly lives. The truth is, “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning — great is Thy faithfulness” (cf. Lam 3:22-23). This was the source of Jeremiah’s persistent living — he was up before dawn every morning listening to God’s Word. Rising early, he was quiet and attentive before the Lord… before the busyness of the day started filling his mind. Here then is the problem of our unfaithfulness and erratic life patterns — we don’t rise up early and listen to God — we don’t daily find a time apart from the crowd, and have a time of silence and solitude for preparing for the day’s journey. Jeremiah persistently rose early every morning to listen to God. There is one thing needful, and that is to do it again and again and again, with great steadfast persistence.

9. Revering God’s Word

The book of Deuteronomy was the handbook for King Josiah’s reform, and the truths of which Jeremiah pondered and absorbed. Deuteronomy recapitulates the totality of what it means to be a people of God — it recollects the experience of being delivered out of Egyptian bondage, preserved in the wilderness, and the life of blessing in the Promised Land. This fifth book of the Pentateuch presents God in a loyal, committed relationship of love with His people — love is the key and characteristic word in the book. The book is full of commands — everyone has choices to make, and they come to us in the form of commands from God — though man isn’t forced to obey (he has been given the freedom not to obey), he is encouraged to obey. Just as Moses preached its message to the people… and King Josiah’s reform was based on that message… so Jeremiah preached that same message to a people who had drifted from its moorings. When King Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo and his son took the throne, descent into laxity and corruption happened quickly. Such descent teaches us two important principles regarding spirituality:

*Drifting is a natural consequence of spiritual neglect.
*Spirituality vanishes quickly without intentional discipline.
The Lord told Jeremiah to take a scroll and write on it all the words that He had spoken to him: “It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin” (cf. Jer 36:2-3). The purpose of the written Word is that it becomes permanently visible and audible (when spoken) and draws human beings into responsiveness. The result of the “scroll” he wrote was the making of the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah had enlisted his friend Baruch in the work — Baruch wrote what Jeremiah dictated (which was the sum of his twenty-three years of preaching). Not long after it was written, the Babylonian army made its way into the land, and destroyed cities that refused to cooperate with them; the world powers of Egypt and Babylon were at each other’s throats, and Jerusalem was dangerously vulnerable. The crisis had drawn the nation to its knees before God. Baruch took the scroll to the temple and read it before the people (cf. Jer 36:4-10)... many who heard it were moved by it. Scripture’s task is to tell people about the mystery of God and the secrets of their own hearts — God’s Word reveals reality and exposes our self-centered hearts. Jeremiah’s writing showed the people how badly they were living and how good the life of God really is. Ultimately, the scroll was given to King Jehoiakim (Josiah’s son), and he responded to it by ridiculing it, tearing it to pieces, and burning it in the fire. Jehoiakim had already murdered the prophet Uriah, who dared to confront him (cf. Jer 26:20-33). Regarding his burning of the scroll, the Lord exclaimed through Jeremiah, “You have burned this scroll, saying, ‘Why have you written on it that the king of Babylon shall certainly come and destroy this land, and shall make man and beast to cease from it?’” (cf. Jer 36:29) — Jehoiakim was interested in an alliance with Egypt and was not favorably disposed to Babylon (cf. 2 Kg 23:34-35). In a further act of defiance, Jehoiakim compounded his sin by ordering the arrest of Baruch and Jeremiah (cf. Jer 36:26), but the Lord intervened and had them hidden. Jehoiakim obviously thought the message that Jeremiah and Baruch preached was simply their own message, and not the message of some divine; he clearly didn’t believe in the God of Israel. The Lord then made the following proclamation concerning Jehoiakim — “You shall have no one to sit on the throne of David, and your dead body shall be cast out to the heat of the day and the frost of the night. I shall also punish you and your descendants and your servants for your iniquity, and I shall bring on them and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the men of Judah all the calamity that I have declared — because they did not listen” (cf. Jer 36:30-31). The key condemnation to the king and his offspring was that “they would not listen!” Scripture is God’s Word calling us to a personal response — the only appropriate response is a reverent answer. The purpose of God’s written Word is to address shipwrecked people and to present God’s way of salvation.

10. Distance Yourself from the Crowd

Integrity is not strengthened by masses of people; as strange as it may seem to some, the more people, the less truth. Crowds are more often foolish than wise... it is puzzling that the appeal to numbers continues to carry so much weight in our political world. The truth that is lived is reduced and distorted by the crowd. Though the crowds who listened to Jeremiah understood what he was saying, their self-concepts were crowd-conditioned — they didn’t disbelieve in God, but they disqualified themselves from strenuous, intentional, personal participation. Essentially, Jeremiah said to the people, “You have a Father who has commanded you to live in total relationship to Him... you know that He has set you apart for a life of love. Why don’t you live in response to it? You have a way of life that requires certain disciplines to main its character — regular worship, faithful prayer, tithing, caring for the poor, moral conduct and the pursuit of
righteousness. Why don’t you do it?” (cf. Jer 35). Jeremiah asks the people to look at the Rech-abites as the “model” they should follow — “pay attention to what is distinctive about them.” The fidelity of the Rechibites and their commitment to live by the convictions handed down to them from their forefathers had become a loud penetrating voice in wayward Israel. The episode was actually a rebuke to the nation of Israel for her stubborn unfaithfulness to God. Jeremiah told the people, “Your problem is not that you are incapable, but that you are lazy! There is not a single person among you who is not capable of practicing the disciplines that support and preserve a life of faith. You have let the crowd turn you into foolish spectators; you have let your lives get flabby and indulgent; you have ignored God’s Word and let the chatter and gossip of the crowd fill your ears!” In much the same way, the moral quality of our country’s culture is despicably shameful, and the spiritual integrity of it an embarrassment — we add dollars to our income, more rooms to our houses, and activities to our schedules… and the quality of our lives diminishes with each addition. On the other hand, every time the habits of the crowd are rejected, and we practice the disciplines of faith, we become a little more alive.

11. The Ultimate Purpose of Exile

Our sense of who we are is very much determined by the place we are in and the people we are with. When our surroundings change, we no longer feel like we belong… that we are no longer needed… that we are now just excess baggage. The Jewish people were taken into exile in Babylon in 586 BC… they were uprooted from the place they knew as home, the place their identity as the people of God had been formed. The tactic employed by the Babylonian King (Nebuchadnezzar) was to remove all persons of influence and leadership from their homeland so that the general populace that remained would be dependent on and submissive to those now governing them. It is interesting to note that 65 year old Jeremiah was left behind — Babylon obviously did not consider him a threat to their leaders. Those who had been taken into exile in Babylon, found themselves in a land where everything was strange and new to them — the customs were uncommon, the language was unknown, the people were different, the weather was atrociously hot, the temples were polluted with immorality, and the landscape was completely foreign to them; all the familiar landmarks they identified with were gone. The essential meaning of being in exile is that we are where we don’t want to be. It is not home. The people achingly longed for Jerusalem, and wallowed in self-pity. Underlying all that the Jewish people were experiencing, was the fact that it was God who had deported them to Babylon (Jer 29:4)… Nebuchadnezzar was simply an agent of the Lord. Judah’s part was to humbly submit to God’s will for them. They had religious leaders with them, however, who simply stirred the pot of discontent — their messages and dreams, besides being false, were destructive, not helpful.

One day two men from Jerusalem appeared unannounced among them: Elasah and Germariah. They had a message from Jeremiah — “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them… plant gardens and eat their produce… marry and have families… seek the welfare of the city… pray to the LORD on its behalf… do not let your prophets and diviners who are among you deceive you; do not listen to the dreams which they dream, for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you in My name” (cf. Jer 29:4-14). Instead of expecting an early return to their homeland, they were to settle down in Babylon and even work & pray for its peace and prosperity. Essentially, the Lord was telling them to make themselves at home even though it may not be their favorite place to
live, and develop the best environment for living possible. Jeremiah had proclaimed a period of seventy years of Babylonian exile (cf. Jer 25:12); in the meantime he counseled his people to settle in and carry on all their normal daily activities, because if all they did was sit around and pine for the day when they got back to Jerusalem, their present lives would be squalid and empty. **Though Babylon was not their choice, it is where God had placed them.** Therefore they needed to establish themselves in it as well as they could, become productive entities in their communities, acquire the skills necessary to work the land and make it fruitful, throw themselves into the place in which they found themselves, and seek God’s direction in all that they did. Jeremiah’s letter was both a rebuke and a challenge: *quit feeling sorry for yourselves, and make the best of where God has placed you.* Throughout the centuries the precepts enjoined here have been followed by the Jewish people who have been dispersed to countries all over the world—they have identified themselves with their respective places of residence, all the while looking forward to the eventual restoration of their native land.

**The aim of the person of faith is not to be as comfortable as possible, but to live as deeply and thoroughly as possible**—prayerfully reflect upon that statement. Will you focus your attention on what is wrong with the world and feel sorry for yourself? Or will you focus your energies on *how you can live at your best in that place where God has placed you?* Far more important than the circumstances in which you find yourself is the presence of God in your midst. It is just as possible to live out the will of God where you are right now as any other place. Consider Paul’s response when he was “in prison” (read Eph 3:1ff; 4:1; 2 Tim 1:8; Col 4:10; Philemon 1:1, 9, 23); it was there that he wrote his prison epistles. Some look at life and complain of what is not there… others look at life and rejoice in what is there. In this context Jeremiah quotes the Word of the Lord: “I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will hear you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you seek me with all your heart. And I will be found by you, and restore your fortunes” (cf Jer 29:11-14). The people had lost everything that they thought was important when they were taken into exile…but ended up finding that which is most important: they found God. The exile tore the cover off their way of life and showed its emptiness; never again could they live by bread alone— the Word of God was now their essential nourishment. The exile was the “crucible of Israel’s faith” — instead of being pushed to the edge of their existence, they were pushed to the center where God was…they had gone from earthly living to abundant living. **William Faulkner** in his book “Lion in the Garden” (Random House, 1968, p. 108) writes, “It’s hard to believe, but disaster seems to be good for people.” When the superfluous is stripped away, we find the essential — and the essential is God. The difficulties of life (exile) reveal what really matters in life — our being conformed to the will of God.

**12. The Importance of Godly Friendships**

The vast majority of people in history books had their fifteen minutes of fame, and then faded into oblivion. The extreme exception blazes more brightly century after century. Jeremiah is one such person — some twenty-six hundred years ago the man made headlines: his theological perception, his religious sensibility, his rhetorical power, his confrontational courage, all made their historical mark. But the primary interest for people of faith today is his personal development. In chapters 37-39, decisive historical events are taking place, and Jeremiah is in the middle of it all. The city of Jerusalem was under final attack by the Babylonians. Jeremiah had preached
to the people that the Babylonian presence was “God’s judgment” — God’s action — as such it was to be accepted and submitted to, but the people kept looking for ways to avoid the reality of His judgment. Patriotism was used to muddle the sense of morality — and a sentry named Irijah had Jeremiah arrested, beaten, and imprisoned on the grounds that he had defected to the enemy. Jeremiah was charged with working against the war effort and with weakening the will of the people to resist the invaders. Zedekiah, a vassal king who was appointed by the Babylonians, had frequent conversations with Jeremiah, probably because of his close associations with his brother (the great Josiah) as well as both of his two nephews (Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin). Being an appointee of Babylon, Zedekiah was a weak king who was easily swayed by the events of the day (circumstances) and people who spoke convincingly … on occasion he would call upon Jeremiah for consultation. Fearing the princes who imprisoned Jeremiah, Zedekiah felt he needed to bring him to his palace in secret for conversation. When the godly man Ebed-Melech, an official in the royal palace, learned that Jeremiah was being held captive in a cistern, he went to the king because of his concern for him, and boldly accused the officials who arrested him and pled with the king for the prophet’s life (cf. Jer 38:7-13). Zedekiah provided a rescue team of thirty men to carry out a rescue operation from the dungeon and transfer Jeremiah to the guardroom, where he would not be subjected to extremely brutal conditions and in all likelihood certain death. Apparently the king provided thirty men to carry out the operation in case of significant opposition to Jeremiah’s removal (cf. Jer 38:7-13). Jeremiah’s character and friendship is what inspired Ebed-Melech to rescue him. One of the wonderful qualities of Jeremiah was the genuine close relationships he had with other believers, which ultimately resulted in his being rescued. Godly friends come alongside us and do whatever they can in our deepest hour of need. Solomon said, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (cf. Prv 17:17). Pity the man who lacks godly friends when the challenges of life overwhelm him.

13. Living by Divine Reason vs. Human Reason

God was the most important reality in Jeremiah life. He believed every person was made for a relationship with God, and that without that relationship people would wander and live falsely. People try to be good without God, and it doesn’t work; they try to live the good life rather than the God life, and they only end up wasting their lives. Jeremiah pleaded with them: “A voice is heard on the bare heights, the weeping and the supplications of the sons of Israel; because they have perverted their way, they have forgotten the LORD their God. ‘Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness’” (Jer 3:21-22). The pleadings were ignored and the judgment came; Babylon’s armies captured the city and took the leaders of the people into exile. The puppet king Zedekiah had been appointed as their leader… and his friends plotted with him to throw off the Babylonian yoke by enlisting Egypt in an alliance; it was a foolish plan that didn’t work. When one is “not willing to do God’s will, he will never know deep in his heart what is really true and trustworthy” (cf. Jn 7:17), because God only reveals His will to the hearts of those who are willing to do His will — God doesn’t cast His pearls before swine (cf. Mt 7:6). Because the unspiritual is not capable of understanding spiritual truths, it doesn’t make sense to him (1 Cor 2: 14); he simply bases everything on human reason. When the conspiracy that Zedekiah was planning with Egypt became known to Nebuchadnezzar, it provoked a severe Babylonian reprisal. The Egyptians saw that an alliance with Judah was not in their best interest, so they abandoned Judah. It was the darkest time in Judah’s history — in a matter of days the city of
Jerusalem was completely plundered, the temple turned into rubble, and thousands of Jews marched off into exile in Babylon.

What Jeremiah did at the time appeared absolutely crazy: he bought a field for seventeen shekels, while the enemy was pounding on the city walls. Why did he do it? He bought the field as an investment in God’s next project for Israel, an investment that, as we later learn, paid off admirably. Jeremiah had preached God’s judgment for years, so at the moment judgment comes, he speaks a message that evokes hope — “Judgment is here, but don’t despair; it is God’s judgment. Face it, and accept the suffering. God is not against you, but for you. God has not rejected you, but is working with you… God will restore health to you, and heal your wounds” (cf. Jer 30:15, 17). Judgment is not the last word; its proper work is to open our hearts to the reality beyond ourselves… to bring an end to self-centered living and self-sufficiency, that we might experience the grace of God’s healing, mercy, and forgiveness. Says the LORD: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued My faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall adorn yourself with timbrels, and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers” (cf. Jer 31:2-4). Her days of unfaithfulness will be over, and she will seek and cleave to the Lord. But now that calamity surrounds the people, however, they don’t believe anything can make things better. So Jeremiah from his confinement in the palace court pours out his message: “There is hope for your future, says the LORD” (cf. Jer 31:17). But the message of hope was no more believed than the message of judgment had been.

One day while all this was going on, Jeremiah’s cousin Hanamel came into the temple courtyard where Jeremiah was confined and offered to sell him a plot of ground out in Anathoth, Jerusalem’s hometown, just three miles northeast of Jerusalem… and the prophet promptly bought the field, for thus says the LORD: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (Jer 32:14-15). Jeremiah knew full well that such a decision was completely unreasonable in the minds of the people, but he didn’t buy the field on their advice, but by the leading of God. He prayed to the Lord, “Thou art the One who made the heavens and the earth! Nothing is too hard for You! Behold the Chaldeans are about to siege the city… yet You, O Lord, have instructed me to buy the field as a witness” (cf. Jer 32:17, 24-25). The LORD responded to him saying: “Is anything too hard for Me? Just as I have brought all this great evil upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them. Fields shall be bought in this land” (cf. Jer 32:27, 42-43). So buying the field in Anathoth was a deliberate act of hope (not wishful thinking). Hope acts on the conviction that God will complete the work that He has begun even when appearances suggest otherwise. Hope is reliance upon grace and the efficacy of God’s Word. As God’s children, we can either languish in despair when trouble besets us, or we can live with hope, trusting that God is at work for our good (cf. Rom 8:28, 31; Phil 2:13). Hope is buying into (believing) what we know to be true, even though living in hope goes against the stream. Jeremiah’s purchase of a plot of ground in Anathoth made the word of God visible — “hope-determined actions” participate in the future that God is bringing into being. It is not easy to act in hope because most of the immediate evidence is against it; therefore doing so means defying the false premises of human reason; thus, it takes courage to act in hope.
14. God Loves All Nations

Contrary to the views of some, God has not abandoned the Gentile world to their own myths and fate... like the nation of Israel, they are a part of God’s creation, and have always been at the forefront in His thinking. As Arend Van Leeuwen says in his book “Christianity in World History” (Edinburgh House Press, 1964, p. 100), “They are ‘the ends’ towards which God’s purposes are directed, the ultimate reason for the work which He has begun on His mountain of Zion, the center of the earth.” The truth is, there are no places or people on earth that are not included in God’s divine plan. It is rooted in the very nature of God. At the time of his calling, Jeremiah was designated “prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5). The life of faith necessarily involves us in a worldwide community. The promise to Abraham was that “in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). God simply chose Israel to be the agency through whom He would bring salvation to the world. He is concerned with the life of all nations for He is their God (cf. Jer 20:4; Is 10:5); His mercy extends to the far corners of the earth. It is God’s world that we live in, and God is the One who rules it.

Though Jeremiah was taken off to Egypt (against his will) by the people at the end of his life, he carried out his appointment as “prophet to the nations” by composing oracles for ten different nations: Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, and Babylon. The oracles are collected in chapters 46-51. Jeremiah cared enough about the ten nations to acquire a thorough and detailed knowledge about them; he painstakingly studied these peoples and the history and politics of these nations. He spoke God’s word in relation to the actual conditions of their existence. The nations were not simply lumped together as “pagan nations.” The content of the message he preached was basically the same as what he preached to his own people: warning and judgment that anticipates salvation. Egypt is promised judgment: “Prepare yourselves baggage for exile, O inhabitants of Egypt! For Memphis shall become a waste, a ruin, without inhabitant” (cf. Jer 46:19). She is also promised salvation: “Afterward Egypt shall be inhabited as in the days of old, says the LORD” (cf. Jer 46:26). The bulk of material to each of the countries is devoted to judgment. The biblical message is the same for the Jew as it is for the Gentile. As Paul puts it, “both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin” (cf. Rom 3:9). The larger the world we live in, the larger our lives develop in response — crossing the boundaries demonstrates God’s universal love. The truth is, people of faith live in a far larger reality than people without faith: “God so loved the world!” Sadly, we often betray this reality. We ignore and even despise outsiders, and isolate ourselves from those unlike us. Meanwhile there are people like Jeremiah who go beyond the boundaries of what is safe and comfortable, learn new languages, discover alien cultures, brave hostility and misunderstanding, and prove to us that the life of faith can be lived in every place and among every people group in the world.

15. Living by Faith in the Midst of Darkness

There is nothing more difficult than “living a life of faith,” and there was never a time when the external conditions were less conducive to living by faith than in those bewildering days following the Babylonian invasion. The temple, focus for worship for some 400 years, was in rubble... and the priestly voices were silent. It was into this situation that Jeremiah challenged them to live a life of faith. The people must have thought about it, but in their minds it was easier to go to Egypt where there was a society of people well established and pain free... so off to Egypt
they went, and they forced Jeremiah to go with them. At the time of the Exodus over 800 years earlier, the Hebrew people were trained by God to live by faith “in the desert” (think about that), but now the inward pull to return to Egypt was too compelling. True, they had been slaves there, but things had changed, and at least it was now a place of safety and security. In spite of this, I find it interesting that the Pharaoh Neco referred to here in Jeremiah 46:2 is the one who slew Josiah at Megiddo some 23 years earlier in 609 BC, and set up Jehoiakim as a vassal king; four years later Neco was defeated at Carchemish (605 BC) by the Babylonians; thus Babylon was now the supreme leader in world affairs. A number of years after the Battle of Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar completely conquer Egypt and left her vulnerable to future attack (Jer 46:18-19); the gods and goddesses of Egypt were punished in the defeat of the people who worshiped them (Jer 46:24-25). Irrespective of the fact that Egypt would ultimately fall to the Babylonians, a few years before that occurred the leaders of Judah decided to move to Egypt where peace, stability and security reigned… where there were no uncertainties or ambiguities… and where everything in life seemed clear and accounted for — Egypt was simply too attractive for Judah to resist.

The problem we have as human beings is that we are strongly influenced by apparent external realities (circumstances and condition), and not the Transcendent Reality (the only Sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords) who sits on the throne of heaven (cf. 1 Tim 6:15; Is 66:1; Acts 7:49). That does not mean there are no clarities in the life of faith, but these spiritual clarities develop from within and in an unhurried fashion; they cannot be quickly imposed from without. Faith invades the muddle — it doesn’t eliminate it. Peace in the soul develops in the midst of chaos, rather than pleasant circumstances. The life of faith is the result of a courageous commitment to God, not from being controlled by others. Though Jeremiah sometimes doubted himself and God, these internal agonies of the flesh, ultimately it never interfered with his commitment; he argued with God but he never abandoned Him — It was with GOD that he had to do. But just because he was sure of God, did not mean that he was always sure of himself… nor did the world around him ever become clear.

Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians as Jeremiah had long warned they would, and a large number of them were rounded up and taken into exile just as he had predicted. The lies of the false prophets and priests were mercilessly exposed, and the integrity of Jeremiah’s preaching was confirmed. One of the leaders of the Babylonian army presented the 65 year old prophet with a choice: he could go to Babylon with the promise of special treatment, or he can stay in Jerusalem and be part of the remnant that remained. Life in Jerusalem would be starting over in the midst of a wrecked city, whereas life in Babylon would be a pleasant, easy retirement… but Jeremiah wasn’t ready for retirement, or tired of living by faith… his habit was believing that God’s grace was “new every morning,” so he chose to stay in Jerusalem. God was present. Living by faith demands a readiness to live by what one cannot see or control or predict. God had said to the people, “If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up… and grant you mercy” (cf. Jer 42:10, 12). Though the leaders of the remnant respected Jeremiah enough to ask for his prayers, they didn’t trust God enough to follow His counsel; they were tired of trying to live by faith, so they decided to go to Egypt. They didn’t want the risk and hazard of depending on an invisible God… they wanted the security and stability of a solid economy, and the soft life that they thought awaited them in Egypt. So they said, “We will go to the land of Egypt, where we will no longer see war… or be hungry for bread… and we will dwell there” (Jer 42:14). They were simply looking for an easy way out… they lived by the old maxim: “Life is greener on the other hill.” The reality was, they would find no safety there (Jer 42:15); instead they would
Jeremiah’s Book of Lamentations

The last scene of Jeremiah’s life shows him preaching God’s Word to a contemptuous people (cf. Jer 44). He said to them, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘You yourselves have seen all the calamity that I brought upon Jerusalem…. I sent you My prophets…. but you would not listen…. Instead you set your mind on entering the land of Egypt to reside there. Therefore I will punish you with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence…. there will be no survivors of the remnant who entered the land of Egypt; only a very few refugees’…. and the people shouted out to Jeremiah, ‘We will not listen to you!’” Therefore the LORD swore by His great name, ‘Never shall My name be invoked again by the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt…. behold, I am watching over them for harm and not for good, and all the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt will meet their end by the sword and by famine until they are completely gone. Then all the remnant of Judah who have gone to the land of Egypt to reside there will know whose word will stand, Mine or theirs…. Behold, I am giving the king of Egypt into the hand of his enemies, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon’” (cf. Jer 44). Thus in closing, we find Jeremiah in Egypt — the place he didn’t want to be — with people who treated him badly, yet he still continued with faithful determination and courage to preach the Word of the Lord.

Jeremiah’s Book of Lamentations

Being as Jeremiah was also the author of the Book of Lamentations, it only seems fitting that what he wrote there should also be included in this study. Essentially, the Book of Lamentations is a mournful postscript to the Book of Jeremiah — it contains five poetic laments that are based upon the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans. Chaldea was the ancient name for Babylonia. As you might recall Abraham was from “Ur of the Chaldees” (cf. Gen 11:31; Neh 9:7), so the Chaldean people go back more than two thousand years before Christ. The Chaldeans were a people with high intellectual skills and possessed a proficiency in science — they were the founders of the science of astronomy. For over 350 years they kept meticulous astronomical records, and one of their astounding contributions to the world was to reckon a year as consisting of 365 days, six hours, fifteen minutes, and forty-one seconds; a calculation that measures within thirty minutes of what modern instruments have finally concluded.

The fall of Jerusalem was a time of incredible suffering and anguish for the Jewish people, and it was this fearful catastrophe that brought forth the Book of Lamentations from the heart of Jeremiah. This book forms a sort of appendix to the prophecies of Jeremiah. It describes the deep mourning of the prophet as he witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Instead of being elated over the fact that his prophecies had been fulfilled, he wept bitterly.

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over the miseries of his people. Lamentations is a mute reminder that sin, in spite of all its allurements and excitement, carries with it heavy weights of sorrow, grief, misery, barrenness, and pain; it is the other side of the “eat, drink, and be merry” coin. Most theologians believe Lamentations was written very soon after the destruction of Jerusalem (about 583 BC) and prior to his being taken to Egypt by the remnant. The vivid description and deep emotions expressed in this book argue for a composition shortly after the events that occurred in 586 BC. Within the city the ever-tightening siege by Babylon’s armies began unraveling the fabric of society—starving mothers ate their own children (cf. Lam 2:20; 4:10)… idolatry flourished as the people cried out to any and every god for deliverance… paranoia gripped the people until they were willing to kill God’s prophet as a traitor and spy just because he spoke the truth. The long siege ended abruptly on July 18, in 586 BC, when the Babylonian army breached the enormous city walls, burned the temple and the king’s palace, and all the other major buildings in the city… and then they destroyed all the walls that provided protection for the city (cf. 2 Kg 25). When the Babylonian armies finished their destruction and departed with their prisoners, they left a jumbled heap of rubble. Jeremiah had witnessed this complete destruction of the city and the desecration of the temple (cf. Jer 39:1-4; 52:12-14). With all of these events now vividly stamped in his mind, Jeremiah sat down and composed a series of five laments (funeral dirges); each chapter contains a separate lament. Through it all Jeremiah laments the tragic “death” of the city of Jerusalem and the results of her demise which were being experienced by the people. The five laments are as follows:

Chapter 1 – Jerusalem’s Desolation because of Her Sin
Chapter 2 – God’s Punishment of Jerusalem’s Sin
Chapter 3 – Jeremiah’s Response
Chapter 4 – The Lord’s Anger
Chapter 5 – The Remnant’s Response