

THE SERMON NOTEBOOK

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Jeremiah's America, # 4

SUBJECT: GOD'S CORRECTION REJECTED

TITLE: A CAPTIVE PEOPLE

TEXT: Jeremiah 5-6.

INTRODUCTION. Some twenty-five years ago I prepared a study on the Book of Jeremiah for the Southern Baptist January Bible Study. I was scheduled to teaching it a number of times in various churches. It was a special privilege to go to some churches year after year, teaching various books of the Bible. In time I expanded these studies, some into more formal commentaries, others remain less formal studies. I prepared these studies first, because I was compelled to follow this method in my studies. Second, I felt that others might benefit from them. The over all title for these studies (some thirty volumes) is THE BIBLE NOTEBOOK, which targets that gap between the formal commentary and the devotional commentary.

Jeremiah was one of my most rewarding studies. I have taught Jeremiah many times and read it many more times, but never have I read it without an overwhelming conviction that I am reading about modern day America. Oh, I know the difference between ancient Israel and America. I understand that America is not the Chosen People and that the covenant God made with Israel says nothing about America. But the message is there and the application is not forced. If you read it, study it, and pray about it, I think the parallels between Judah and America will leap off the pages before your eyes.

In chapters 4-5, we see a captive people. First, they were captives of sin so vile that the Lord accuses the nation of being treacherous. Then, the Lord warns them of another captivity, a literal seventy years captivity in Babylon. Clearly, we are introduced to a people who have brazenly and arrogantly rejected God. He said they "refuse to receive correction" (5:3). Let us look at these two captivities.

I. FIRST, THEY WERE CAPTIVES OF SIN.

A. God Called Their Rebellion Treacherous, 3:6-11; 5:1ff.

The people were guilty before God, and they could not plead ignorance. The word sin in the Old Testament means to miss the mark. Transgression means to step across the line with your eyes wide open. Iniquity carries the idea of twisted or warped. If you continue to sin against God and to transgress His laws, you will find your life twisted and warped by those sins. God sarcastically says of the people of Judah: "For My people are foolish, They know Me not; They are stupid children And have no understanding. They are shrewd to do evil, But to do good they do not know" (Jer.

3:22). God's assessment was that they were foolish, even stupid - not that they did not know any better, but that they thought of themselves as enlightened when He saw them as treacherous. They were foolish, but they could not plead ignorance. They were guilty of iniquity, not ignorance. When America sins against a far greater light, call it what it is. Iniquity. Interestingly, Americans do not mind admitting to doing something foolish, making a bad decision, or even "doing something stupid." Just don't call it sin! That is negative. It is even worse than that - it is judgmental, which is about as bad as it gets in postmodern America.

B. Those Israelites Were Slaves to Specific Sins.

1. Idolatry was at the heart of their rebellion.

Almost from the moment they entered the Land of Canaan, they turned to false gods. They had refused to drive out the pagan people as they were commanded, and before long they were associating with the pagan people left in the land. One of the great attraction was their pagan worship which appealed to the flesh. Drunkenness and immorality were pursued with religious fervor. Time after time God sent His judgment to cause them to repent, but then a new generation would turn again to idolatry. This cycle of rebellion, judgment, repentance, and deliverance was repeated over and over during the period of the judges. During the time of the kings they continually turned to false gods.

2. Immorality was a serious issue among those ancient Israelites.

Adultery, fornication, and homosexuality are soundly and emphatically condemned in the Law, yet these people continually committed them. In Amos, the Lord said that a father and his son would take the cloak of a poor man, taken as collateral for a loan to buy food for his family for that day, and go to a pagan temple and spread it before some pagan god and commit adultery with the same temple prostitute.

God sets a much higher standard for His people than the pagan people of the world. He blessed men and women with a sexual drive and it is His will for that drive to be fulfilled within marriage - and His purpose is one man and one woman for life. Pre-marital sex and extra-marital sex are strongly condemned in the Law. In fact, when Israel was a theocracy those who were proved to be immoral were to be taken outside the town and stoned to death. Jesus taught forgiveness, and held our forgiveness to those who were immoral, but that does not lessen the seriousness of immorality or the impact on lives, then or now.

3. Drunkenness was a problem in ancient Israel.

Jeremiah does not specifically condemn substance abuse in these chapters, but a study of the Book of Proverbs reveals that the Lord condemns drunkenness and warns His people of the danger in beverage alcohol. Drunkenness and immorality were often associated - and idolatry often offered opportunity for both. Today, we can add drug abuse to that.

4. Covetousness led to many other sins.

Covetousness is the sin behind many other sins. It leads to various expressions of greed, and greed often leads those ancients to abuse the poor. They took their property, worked them without fair wages, and at times enslaved them or their children. Through Amos, the Lord charged that the wealthy had taken the property of the poor and after that they would lust for the dust that settled in the poor person's hair.

5. Sins of speech often accompanies other sins.

While Jeremiah does not focus on the use of profanity and vulgarity, Isaiah confessed to living among a people of unclean lips (Is. 6). Solomon was inspired to warn us about the sins of the tongue. In the New Testament, James describes very graphically the sin of the tongue.

"Traveling on a plane next to a salesman, Billy Graham asked him, "Are you paid anything for all the swearing you do?" "No," was the startled reply, "I do it for nothing."

"Nothing?" cried the famous preacher. "You work cheap! You throw aside your character as a gentleman, inflict pain on your friends, break the Lord's commandments, and endanger your own soul -- and all for nothing! You certainly work cheap -- TOO CHEAP!" Yes, swearing is not only a 'cheap' practice in many ways, but it is also a terrible sin which grieves the heart of God!

[Bible Illustrator].

C. This Captivity Was Almost Universal, 5:1-2.

Abraham, in Genesis 18, pleaded with the Lord to spare Sodom. You know the story. He asked God to spare the city if there were fifty righteous people in it - then he came down to forty, then thirty, and twenty, and finally to ten. The Lord agreed, but ten righteous people were not to be found in Sodom, so God destroyed the city. But God is talking with Jeremiah about Jerusalem, not Sodom! Surely there would be hundreds of righteous people in Jerusalem. After all, they had the temple, they had the sacrificial system, they had the priests, they had the prophets, and they had the Scripture. Yet, God does not challenge Jeremiah to find fifty righteous people, or forty, or even ten. Listen to what He says:

"Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; See now and know; And seek in her open places **If you can find a man**, If there is anyone who executes judgment, Who seeks the truth, And I will pardon her. Though they say, 'As the LORD lives,' Surely they swear falsely" (5:1-2).

God challenged Jeremiah to try to find one righteous man in all of Jerusalem. He did not tell him to see if he could find a religious person in the city. No doubt there were plenty of them. But God makes a distinction between righteousness and religion.

D. Those Ancient Israelites Were Captives of Religion.

1. The people were religions, but not righteous.

Please understand this: They were religious. But they were not righteous! Now, let me stress this one point: God did not tell Jeremiah to search among the pagan people of the city to see if he could find one righteousness man (5:1-2). He could search among the people who would boast of their faithfulness to the Lord. He was to search among those who came regularly to the temple with their sacrifices and offerings. We are not speaking here only of pagans who bowed before Baal. We are not talking about those Israelites who occasionally attended some function at a pagan temple. We are talking about those religious Jews who attended the feasts and observed the rituals and ceremonies of Judaism. Jeremiah was to search for a righteous man among those who were very religious. He could search among the prophets and priests!

Jesus would call the most religious people of First Century Jerusalem a bunch of snakes. He called them hypocrites. Jesus would know. Are we not told that He knew what was in every man? God knew the hearts of the people of Jeremiah's day. Perhaps the right word for those people is the word religiosity.

2. The problem was compounded by false prophets, and ungodly priests, 5:30-31.

*“An appalling and horrible thing Has happened in the land: **The prophets prophesy falsely,** And the priests rule on their own authority; And My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?”*

There are three shocking indictment here - indictments made by the Lord God Himself - and He would know.

1) The prophets prophesy falsely. They were neither the first nor the last to prophesy falsely. Aren't you glad all the false prophets died out a twenty-five hundred years ago?! We don't have to worry about false prophets today, right!?

2) The priests rule on their own authority - God was not their authority. Just prior to this, a scroll of the Law was found in the Temple during the renovation when Josiah was king and when it was read, Josiah led in a great revival effort. But have you ever stopped to wonder how long the priests had performed their duties, taught the people, and offered sacrifices in the temple - without the Word of God. Of course we have religious leaders today who tell us the Bible is not their authority.

3) The people loved it. The unrighteous people of the world have what I would call a religious drive, and they will seek to satisfy it one way or another. The righteous person seeks to worship the true God in truth and in spirit, but the unrighteous person is perfectly happy with popular preaching, the world's music, entertainment, and psychological solutions to spiritual problems.

II. SIN'S CAPTIVES WOULD BECOME BABYLON'S CAPTIVES, 6:16-30.

A. God Warns His People of the Coming Captivity, 6:1.

“Flee for safety, O sons of Benjamin, From the midst of Jerusalem! Now blow a trumpet in Tekoa And raise a signal over Beth-haccerem; **For evil looks down from the north, And a great destruction.**”

This is the boiling pot of God's wrath facing away from the north, about which we read in 1:13. The reference is to Babylon, whose armies would circle around the Arabian desert and invade Israel from the north. There would be three invasions under Nebuchadnezzar, led by his commander, Nebuzaradan. The first was in 606 B. C., at which time they carried away Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Obednego, along with other young boys they would train to serve Nebuchadnezzar. Then, when Judah rebelled, they would come again in 597 B. C. and take many more captives back to Babylon. Once again, Judah would rebel and in 586 B. C., Babylon would return and lay siege to the city, break down the wall, loot Jerusalem, destroy the temple after stripping it anything of value, and take away the rest of the leading citizens.

The Captivity would last seventy years, during which time Judah was purged of idolatry. They would be guilty of a lot of sins in the years ahead but most of the Jews would die rather than bow before an idol after the return for Captivity.

There is something else that should be of interest to us today, especially when there people searching for the lost Ark of the Covenant (remember the movie, RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK?). I recently read a book in which the author describes his search for the lost Ark of the Covenant. He is one among many who believe the priests either hid the Ark (possibly in some hidden compartment underneath the city of Jerusalem, or they had it taken to Ethiopia or some other place to be kept in safety until the time the Lord would have it returned. In Jeremiah 3:16-18, however, we find another possibility:

“It shall be in those days when you are multiplied and increased in the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘**they will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.'** And ***it will not come to mind***, nor will they remember it, nor will they miss it, ***nor will it be made again***. **At that time they will call Jerusalem 'The Throne of the LORD,'** and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the LORD; nor will they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart. In those days the house of Judah will walk with the house of Israel, and they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance.”

If this refers to the millennial reign of Christ, then the Ark may be hidden away somewhere. However, if this is a reference to the return of the remnant from Babylon, it means that the Ark of the Covenant was taken from the Temple along with the sacred vessels which Belshazzar used to toast his pagan gods (Daniel 6). If the Ark was destroyed for its gold, then God is telling them not

to try to rebuild it when they returned. From that time forth the city of Jerusalem would be the symbol of God's presence with His people, not the Ark. I have talked with two long time Old Testament professors who subscribe to this view.

B. God States the Reasons for the Coming Captivity, 6:16-20.

“Thus says the LORD, "Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls. But **they said, 'We will not walk in it'**” (v. 16).

“And I set watchmen over you, saying, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!' But they said, 'We will not listen’” (v. 17).

“**Therefore** hear, O nations, And know, O congregation, what is among them. Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people, The fruit of their plans, **Because they have not listened to My words, And as for My law, they have rejected it also**” (18-19).

Briefly, what this passage says is that God commanded them to walk in the old paths - according to His Word and His Law, but they said, “We will not walk in it.” He sent messengers, but they said, “We will not listen to them.” Their sin is not ignorance, it is iniquity. They are in rebellion against God:

- 1) We will not walk in the ancient paths (the path of righteousness, Ps. 23).
- 2) We will not listen - they had ears but could not, or would not hear (5:20-21).
- 3) They would not listen to His Word.
- 4) They rejected His Law.

They continued to bring sacrifices and offerings, but God said:

“For what purpose does frankincense come to Me from Sheba And the sweet cane from a distant land? **Your burnt offerings are not acceptable And your sacrifices are not pleasing to Me**” (v. 20).

C. God Announces His Judgment, 6:22-30.

Long before this warning, Judah had been warned that if they rejected the Lord He would raise up Babylon and use them to take Judah into captivity for seventy years - one year for every Sabbath Year they had refused to observe. God had warned Israel that he would use Assyria to judge them if they did not repent. They didn't, and He did (in 722 B.C.). He warned Judah that he would break the power of Assyria and raise up Babylon to take them into Captivity if they did not follow Him. They didn't, and He did.

The Lord reveals before they come something of the cruelty of the Babylonian invaders:

“Thus says the LORD, "Behold, a people is coming from the north land, And a great nation will be aroused from the remote parts of the earth. They seize bow and spear; They are cruel and have no mercy; Their voice roars like the sea, And they ride on horses, Arrayed as a man for the battle Against you, O daughter of Zion! We have heard the report of it; Our hands are limp. Anguish has seized us, Pain as of a woman in childbirth” (6:22-23).

III. IN MANY WAYS JUDAH MIRRORS AMERICA.

A. We Are Guilty of Many of the Same Sins.

1. America is guilty of idolatry.

The sin of which America is guilty is not that of burning incense on a pagan altar. Paul wrote, “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5). Covetousness, greed, and materialism are called idolatry. If you put anything between yourself and the Lord you are guilty of idolatry - relationships, recreation, entertainment, house, car, clothes, property, or a investments. None of these are sinful unless we allow them to get between ourselves and the Lord.

2. America is guilty of immorality.

There has never been a generation that did not have to deal with the temptations of the flesh, but post-Christian America entertains itself with that which would have shocked their forefathers. The Mississippi hill country farmer came in from the field, stabled his horse and started for the house for dinner, wondering who owned the Model T parked near the front gate. Just as he opened the gate and started in, he looked up and recognized ladies for whom his wife made dresses. He not only recognized the ladies, he realized that he had obviously walked in on a scene he should not have seen. It was his impression that the ladies must have removed their dresses in order to try on another one. He dropped his head and quickly turned and headed back out the gate, too speechless to apologize. The very perceptive lady stopped him: “It’s all right. We came out from town like this.” She was wearing shorts! Things have certainly changed in America in the past century.

Even professing Christians watch TV shows filled with indecent scenes, suggestive language, and dress and speech that feed lust. Anyone who objects is a prude. Hollywood stars do public service ads asking Americans to keep the air and streams clean, yet they pollute the airwaves with vile language. Sex acts are portrayed on screen in theaters - or so they tell me, I haven’t been inside a theater in years. The last time I went to see a G rated film I had to sit through preview of another movie that was definitely not rated G.

Militant homosexual activists are crusading for same sex marriage, marriage benefits, the right to adopt children - even the right to have homosexuals chosen to lead boy scouts. They parade naked in the streets of New York to make some perverted point.

Pornography is a serious sin. I spent some time with Tim Vineyard at Glorieta Conference Center in September, 2003. Tim is the LifeWay Christian Resource Vice President over the Technology Division. I had the privilege of voting to create that division and I had heard Tim make reports at Nashville, Ridgecrest, and Glorieta. He was talking with someone at lunch about filters he had set up to block pornography at LifeWay. When he mentioned how many thousands of hits are made each day by the porn industry to get through to someone at LifeWay, I began asking questions. Why do they do that? I wondered if this was simply an in your face attempt to shock Christians. "No," he said. "Pornography is highly addictive and they are trying to get customers." I asked why they wanted to see people addicted to pornography if those people would then go to some store and buy a pornographic magazine. He then explained how they would send the pictures to people - just as soon as they made the purchase on their credit card. What is even more shocking is the number of people who become addicted to pornography who profess to be Christians. Focus on the family tells us that many of them are church leaders.

3. Violence is rampant in America.

We have always had violent people, and people who committed acts of violence when provoked. Today, however, we seem to be seeing more and more random acts of senseless violence. The Belt Way snipers terrorized several states for weeks before they were caught. The Green River serial killer killed something like fifty people and when the judge announced the sentence - a life sentence plus a ten thousand dollar fine for each murder - he told the confessed killer to turn around and look at all the people behind him. The judge went on to tell him that he was going to spend the rest of his life in prison, most of it in solitary confinement. The judge told him that the last thing he wanted him to see before going into that cell was the faces of the families of his victims. He wanted him to see those faces for the rest of his life.

Tom Ridge, Director of Homeland Defense, announced before Christmas, 2003, that he was raising the alert from yellow to orange - next to the highest alert - because of information that suggested that Islamic terrorists were planning attacks that would surpass 9-11-2001. America is at risk today and some believe that God is judging the nation. America is guilty of about every sin condemned in Jeremiah - plus sins they never dreamed of in their day - identity fraud, electronic theft, and all sorts of corruption. Judah knew why God judged Israel so severely, yet they committed the same sins. America knows - or should know - why God judged Judah, yet she continues in those sins, and scoffs at anyone who calls it sin today.

B. We Have Rejected the Ancient Paths.

1. America refuses to walk in the paths of righteousness.

America today can point to the mega-churches across the land and boast of the success of the church. Pastors are talking about marketing the church, marketing young people. Some liberal minister applauds every suit the ACLU files. The Rev. Barry Lynn, who heads up Americans United for Separation of Church and State, is disturbed when he sees a display of the Ten Commandments because an atheist or Muslim who sees them may feel hurt. A suit was filed against a fire department in 2003 when a liberal lawyer looked through the open door and saw a Christmas tree inside the building.

2. We desperately need to return to the paths founders and New Testament saints walked.

America is still religious, but many have forsaken the paths of righteousness walked by the founders of this great country. We must pray that America will return to the old paths. I am afraid that millions of America are perfectly happy being religious, but have no concept of righteousness.

The Lord repeatedly invited Judah to repent and return to Him, but she refused. We have seen several “wake-up calls” in the last few years, with the attacks of nine-eleven being the clearest. The heightened alerts of 2003 should bring Americans to their knees, but there is little sign that we are returning to the ancient paths - the paths of righteousness. There have also been natural disasters which should have put America on her knees, but she still did not return to God. We have witnessed some of the most powerful hurricanes on record during the past months. Has America returned to God? A few have, but masses have not. We are engaged in a war against terrorists. Politicians are becoming more and more hostile in attacks on the other party.

D. Judgment Is a Distinct Possibility for America.

Thirty years ago I heard a preacher say, “If God doesn’t judge America he owes Sodom and Gomorrah an apology.” Theologically speaking, that is a dumb statement! God never owes anyone an apology. Anyone who even thinks such a thing owes God an apology. At the same time, I can understand that preacher’s burden for American.

CONCLUSION. There are many parallels between America today and ancient Israel (and Judah). We have looked at a number of them. Now I would like for us to look at one more. Even as judgment approached, the Lord was imploring the people to repent of their sin, to return to Him. He exhorted, “Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backsliding” (Jr. 3:22).

We desperately need to give attention to the invitation to call on the Lord for this healing for America today:

“(If) My people who are called by My name humble themselves, pray and seek My face, and turn from their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land” (2 Chron 7:14, HCSB).

