



JEREMIAH

A READING GUIDE
PART ONE

CROSSINGS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

orientation	<i>TIMELINES & MAP</i>
introduction	<i>QUESTIONS</i>
chapter 00	<i>JEREMIAH 1:1-3</i>
chapter 01	<i>JEREMIAH 1:4-20</i>
chapter 02	<i>JEREMIAH 2:1-6:30</i>
chapter 03	<i>JEREMIAH 7:1-8:3</i>
chapter 04	<i>JEREMIAH 8:4-9:25</i>
chapter 05	<i>JEREMIAH 10:1-25</i>
chapter 06	<i>JEREMIAH 11:1-13:27</i>
chapter 07	<i>JEREMIAH 14:1-15:27</i>
chapter 08	<i>JEREMIAH 16:1-20:18</i>
chapter 09	<i>JEREMIAH 21:1-25:38</i>

Orientation to Jeremiah

We are separated from Jeremiah and his world by over 2,500 years and vastly different cultures. If we are going to enter into Jeremiah's story and discover how it is our own, we will need some help.

Jeremiah called God, "Yahweh." In this guide, that name will be represented by the consonants **YHWH**, based on the Hebrew. Ironically, we aren't really sure how to pronounce this name. "Yahweh" is just our best guess. This name is revealed in Exodus 3 as God's name based on the covenant. It means something like "Presence" or "Being." In this guide, we will prefer YHWH out of respect for the mystery of the ultimate Being.

Jeremiah mentions places, countries, and people groups that most people are unfamiliar with. There are unique names and places that Jeremiah knows of that we have a hard time placing in a mental map.

Jeremiah discusses kings and historical events that he assumes we already know. He wrote to people who possibly lived through these events and remembered the people. Even later generations were like to have heard stories about what their ancestors had gone through. In the same way that we might remember, in chronological order, the last 5 presidents of the United States, Jeremiah expects us to know the last 5 kings of Jerusalem.

And what's more, Jeremiah doesn't tell a linear, chronological story.

This part of the guide is something we expect will be revisited often as we read Jeremiah as a community.

Where is Babylon? Edom? Egypt?

Who is Josiah? Zedekiah? Nebuchadnezzar?

What were the events leading up to and after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE?

This part of the guide is where you can come to reorient yourself as you listen to teachings on Sunday or discuss them in your group.

We hope it serves you well and helps you put yourself into the Story.

Historical Background

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BCE when the Assyrian Empire captured the capital Samaria. Its inhabitants were exiled and new, foreign people repopulated the territory. Jeremiah expects that people in his day remember that catastrophe over 100 years later when he speaks his prophetic words.

A key moment for those living in Jerusalem occurred around 701 BCE under the king Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20). At that time, the Assyrian armies came to conquer Jerusalem because Hezekiah refused to pay tribute to the King of Assyria. Under the impending doom, the king turned to the prophet Isaiah who told him that the Assyrians would not breach the walls. Then, whether because Hezekiah paid off the Assyrians or because of a miraculous confusion inside the Assyrian war camp (or both), the Assyrians turned tail and went home. This led to a theological assertion that YHWH, the God of Israel, would not allow the sacred mount of Jerusalem to be conquered. This misinformed theological and political belief would come back to haunt many who lived in Jerusalem later.

Finally, with the Assyrian empire in decline, King Josiah led a national, religious reform to centralize all worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Kings 22-23). According to the historical account, this was incited because a copy of the Torah scroll (probably Deuteronomy) was discovered in the Temple. Apparently, no one had heard of or read this document for centuries. Some scholars think scribes working with Josiah even helped compose parts of what we know as Deuteronomy. Regardless, this reform would leave its mark on the people of Jerusalem. It attempted to reform their religious rituals and national identity. It made YHWH alone Israel's national God (people were serving other gods at the time in addition to YHWH). It was ultimately only a superficial reform according to the biblical historians, since after Josiah's untimely death in 609 BCE, the people reverted to their former practices.

The biblical account places Jeremiah's career at the beginning of the end of Jerusalem: right at the end of Josiah's kingship.

The Rulers and Events of Jeremiah

King Josiah: 640-609 BCE

Instituted religious reforms, back toward worship of Yahweh, beginning with the discovery of the lost "book of the law" in the Jerusalem temple c. 622 BCE. Died fighting Pharaoh Necho of Egypt who was trying to assist the Assyrians. Josiah was likely in alliance with the Babylonians.

King Jehoahaz/Shallum: 609 BCE

Deposed by Pharaoh Necho after a three-month reign. Replaced by his older brother Eliakim/Jehoiakim. He died in Egypt (2 Kgs 23:31-35; Jer 22:11-12).

Jehoiakim/Eliakim: 609-598

For the last three years of Jehoiakim's reign, he was a puppet king for Babylon. Eventually he revolted, the Babylonians came in 605 BCE and carried off elite citizens into captivity (first exile), including Daniel and his three friends (2 Kgs 24:1; Dan 1:1). Eventually, Jehoiakim himself was carried off into captivity in Babylon after rebelling against Babylonian rule.

Jehoiachin/Coniah: 598-597

Babylonians came in 597 a second time. They removed Jehoiachin from the throne and replaced him with his uncle Zedekiah (Jehoiakim's brother). Ten thousand citizens of Judah were carried off into exile in Babylon at this time (2 Kgs 24:14), including the prophet Ezekiel.

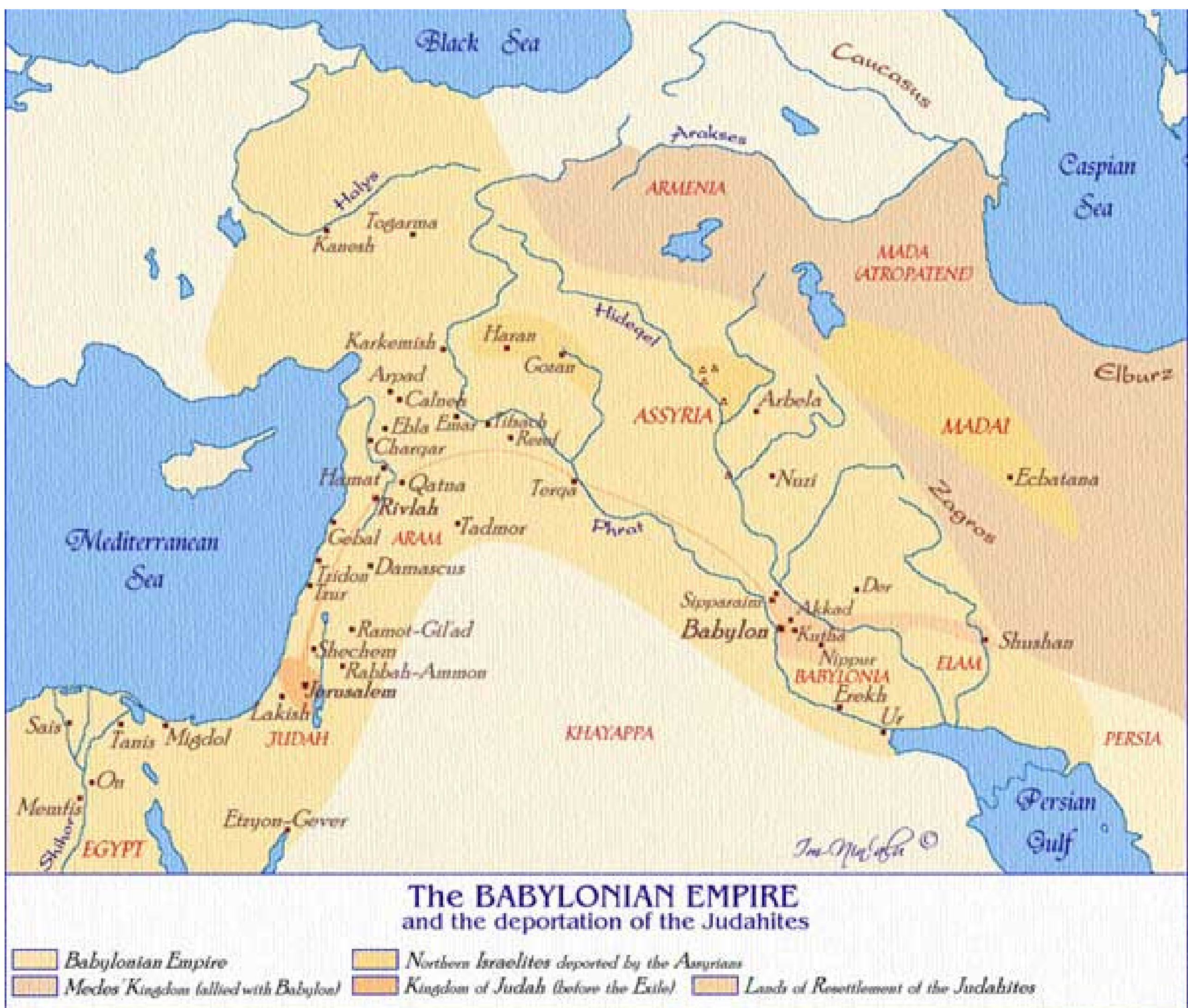
Zedekiah/Mattaniah: 597-586

Zedekiah refused to surrender to the Babylonians (Jer 34:1-7; 38:14-28). The Babylonians came for a third time in 587/86 and destroyed Jerusalem. They captured Zedekiah and put out his eyes after killing his sons in front of him (2 Kgs 25:6-7; Jer 39:6-7).

Gedaliah: 586

Gedaliah was a citizen of Judah who came from a powerful family (Shaphan family) who were the allies of Jeremiah. He was appointed governor by the Babylonians to rule the remnant of the population still in Judah. He ruled Judah for 7 months until he was assassinated (2 Kgs 25:22-26; Jeremiah 40-41). The rebels then fled to Egypt after Gedaliah was assassinated and took Jeremiah and Baruch with them (Jeremiah 42-43).

Map of Israel and Ancient World in Jeremiah's Time



Introduction

Your job is to pull up and tear down, take apart and demolish, And then start over, building and planting.

Jeremiah 1:10 MSG

Jeremiah is a strange book.

It has confused scholars, pastors, and casual readers alike.

It could be confusing because we just don't get how prophecy worked in the ancient world; that our imaginations haven't been prepared to envision a world in which the seat of government and the place of worship were right next door to one another, blurring the boundaries between politics and spirituality.

It could be that the book disorients us because the book does not progress in a linear fashion.

It's more like Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* or Christopher Nolan's *Memento*.

Jeremiah skips around descriptions of different kings of Jerusalem like a playlist on shuffle.

He assumes you know these ineffective leaders, the history of the city, and the plight of the people.

Even experts aren't sure how to best approach the prophet. The Hebrew text, which most of our English Bibles are working from, is slightly longer and has a different order when compared to the Greek version (Septuagint or LXX). Which probably means that different communities in the ancient world read the book differently, almost like a choose-your-own-adventure version of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is just a really strange book for people living in the 21st century.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to enter into Jeremiah's world and story.

In fact, we may not be able to afford missing out on what Jeremiah said and did during the crisis that led up to the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of Israelites in 586 BCE. Because even though we are separated by 2,500 years, different languages, and contrasting societies, our world is remarkably similar to the conflicts and anxieties which gripped the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time.

They asked Questions like:

How do I discern the truth when different mediums of information are saying completely opposite things about my world?

How do I navigate my religious experience when opposing political views are claiming to speak for God?

How do I live in relationship to God when the people who are supposed to represent God are destroying God's public image?

How do I express my frustration to or with God when my expectations aren't met and my soul is crushed by friends and the weight of the world?

What do I say to people who have been manipulated or abused by religious authorities and political figureheads?

If you find yourself asking questions like this, if you've felt the weight of these tensions, if you feel like you've come to the end of religion...Jeremiah has a word for you.

This guide is meant to be an orienting assistant—a compass and map—to the world and story of Jeremiah. It will have a list of kings, a timeline, a concordance of key terms. But it will also try to help us cut through the gap of culture and time; to get us to ask the questions Jeremiah asked his contemporaries for ourselves.

Each chapter of this guide will correspond to each week of our study of Jeremiah on Sundays. The verse highlighted at the top of this introduction comes from the moment when Jeremiah received his prophetic calling. There are six verbs: pull up, tear down, take apart, demolish, build, and plant. Two-thirds deconstruction, one-third reconstruction.

The prophetic imagination requires us to perform both kinds of action.

We must **deconstruct** damaging, unhelpful, prohibitive ways of living in community.

We must **reconstruct** vibrant, healthy, self-aware lives.

The prophetic lifestyle is both public and private.

Jeremiah's words are recorded. His actions are on display. He speaks to power.

His prophetic imagination destabilized, alarmed, and offended his contemporaries.

But Jeremiah, the person, the prophet, also experienced an internal, personal struggle.

He felt what God felt when he looked at his world.

He felt the betrayal of his friends, family, and people.

He experienced the pendulum swinging between depression and euphoria.

Entering into Jeremiah's story isn't just an individual project though.

It's also something done in public, in community.

This guide exists to orient us to the world and text of Jeremiah.

But it is also here to ask four questions of us:

What parts of our personal lives need to be deconstructed, scrapped, and overturned based on the words of Jeremiah?

What parts of our personal lives need attention, rebuilding, and active construction?

How is Jeremiah calling our society to tear down unjust social institutions and corrupt systems?

Where is Jeremiah calling us to plant the seeds of deep hope, restorative community, and repair relationships?

Four moves.

Four questions.

An infinite array of possible answers.

Personal deconstruction.

Personal reconstruction.

Public deconstruction.

Public reconstruction.

If we have the ears to hear and eyes to see, Jeremiah offers us ways of answering these vital questions.

Whether you read through these questions and guided discussions on your own or in a group, may you find the courage to ask these questions honestly, answer them creatively, and find the intersection of God's Story, Jeremiah's story, and your own.

Shalom.

0. Pilot: Jeremiah's World (Jer. 1:1-3)

The Message of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah of the family of priests who lived in Anathoth in the country of Benjamin. God's Message began to come to him during the thirteenth year that Josiah son of Amon reigned over Judah. It continued to come to him during the time Jehoiakim son of Josiah reigned over Judah. And it continued to come to him clear down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of the reign of Zedekiah son of Josiah over Judah, the year that Jerusalem was taken into exile.

Jeremiah 1:1-3 MSG

Think about your favorite television series. What sets it apart as truly great?
Character development?
Narrative twists?
A surprising or satisfying conclusion?

For me, it's all about the pilot episode.
I do not like being told that it takes two seasons for a show to hit its stride.

For many, NBC's *The Office* (American version) is one of those classic favorites.

Greg Daniels, the head writer for the show, once said that the most important thing about the first episode, ***the pilot, was "about creating the world [of the show] as opposed to the writing of the words."***

In the first episode, the writers were less concerned with pithy dialogue than they were about establishing the space and the world that the show would inhabit.

The pilot episode of a creative story must orient us to its world.

The architecture of the space.

The cast of characters.

The first three verses of Jeremiah serve this purpose.

We are told that the prophet Jeremiah comes from a family of priests, these people who made sure that God's holy space was kept clean, that instructions were being followed.

We are informed that his priestly family is from Anathoth, a group that was rejected by Solomon as royal priests and banished to their hometown (1 Kings 2:26-27).

Our author tells us that Jeremiah spoke and acted from the time of Josiah (c. 609 BCE), the king who reformed Temple religion to worship YHWH, the God of Israel (2 Kings 22-23), all the way down to Zedekiah who caused Jerusalem to go into Exile in 586 BCE.

All in all, Jeremiah's prophetic vocation spanned roughly thirty years.

A defrocked priest from a rejected family.

A religious and political outsider.

A man who knew what exile felt like before his own people would experience it.

Even the name Jeremiah is ambiguous.

Some think his name meant "YHWH shall be exalted."

Other options, according to the Hebrew, are "YHWH deceives.""

Depending on who you were in Jeremiah's day, you would have read a lot into that name.

Depending on your political agenda, social status, or religious background you would have said one of two things about Jeremiah:

He's tricking us! He's no patriot! He speaks deceptive words about God!

He exalts YHWH, the true God of Israel! Jeremiah speaks for God.

In Jeremiah's world, people argued politics.

They thought Jerusalem would only be safe if they made the right political ally, whether Egypt or Babylon.

In Jeremiah's world, people argued about religion.

Some thought God would never allow harm to come to their city, their Temple.

Some thought that actions out of alignment with YHWH's character would bring destruction regardless of "faith statements."

In Jeremiah's world people just argued about anything.

Fear and anxiety ruled the day.

Everyone wanted to win others to their side against the evil "other."

Jeremiah, at times, remained painfully in the middle.

He felt God's pain, the betrayal of his people, their inability to see beyond the moment.

He felt for his friends and family, their real anxieties and needs, their struggle to survive.

But Jeremiah did not always stay in the middle.

He told people to surrender to Babylon - a political act.

He told people their religion was corrupt and unable to save them.

He told them their national story was no protection for their national crimes.

He told them to change.

He told them to accept punishment.

Confess their wrongs.

Admit defeat.

Make restitutions.

Into a world of kings, armies, gods, and bickering people, a prophet with a curious name entered the story.

If we want to understand Jeremiah, we must know this world, ***because it is also our world.***

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: Where do you come from? What is your family history and trajectory? In what ways must you deconstruct your personal and family history to understand the moment you are in and the struggles you undergo? Where have you felt the sting of rejection because of your family, your skin, your background, your identity?

Personal Reconstruction: How can you construct a positive, hopeful direction from these experiences? In what ways does God call you out of rejection and banishment into God's mission for the world? How might these come to make you a unique expression of God's Kingdom?

Public Deconstruction: What public deconstruction is needed of our national, local stories? Does having that conversation seem scary or uncomfortable? What might any of these tensions be telling you? How could deconstructing America's and the Church's role in racism, bigotry, and role in the world be part of paving the way for the Kingdom of God?

Public Reconstruction: What kind of public construction or restoration might you be called to? Jeremiah's career was framed by a king of Judah who reformed Israelite religion according to the Book of Deuteronomy. How might we allow our prophetic imaginations and Story-formed lives to be a public expression of new directions for our local schools, businesses, or political dialogue? How might we reform our world with more equity and solidarity?

1. Jeremiah's Mission (Jer. 1:4-19)

*"But you—up on your feet and get dressed for work!
Stand up and say your piece. Say exactly what I tell you to say.
Don't pull your punches
or I'll pull you out of the lineup...
They'll fight you, but they won't
even scratch you.
I'll back you up every inch of the way."*

Jeremiah 1:17, 19 MSG

The beginning of Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as a "call scene" for the prophet. In the Hebrew Scriptures, scenes like this one were almost stereotypical. Whether you know it or not, you're supposed to be thinking of another prophet when you read these opening lines: Moses, the paradigmatic prophet (according to Deuteronomy).

If you're not familiar with the story of Moses in Exodus, here are the basics: Moses was called by God (YHWH) to speak on God's behalf. Moses hedged by saying he couldn't speak well. YHWH refuses his excuse by promising to go with Moses and support him. Now go back and look at Jeremiah's calling. It's uncanny.

This was intentional.

Just as God called Moses as a spokesman to announce the end of Egypt's power, God is now calling Jeremiah to announce, to his own people, the end of their reign of terror.

God is asking Jeremiah to tell his own people that they're going to a different kind of Egypt all over again:

Exile.

Jeremiah is a book written to exiles wondering how they got there and whether it would ever end. It's a reverse-engineered map showing where they went wrong and how they might possibly correct the course.

It almost feels harsh, these words God speaks to Jeremiah.

*Enough with the excuses!
Get dressed and get to work!
Don't chicken out!*

As we are going to see over the course of the book, Jeremiah's task was terrifying. Jeremiah would be called every name in the book: unpatriotic, traitor, defector, opportunist, fear-monger, fake prophet, and liar, to name a few. This is a person who needs backup and emotional support. His job description is literally to tear up nations and start new communities in their place.

Consider the reality that to speak prophetically is, by definition, to be misunderstood by others with alternative allegiances. Jeremiah, despite his protests, was not called to sit by the side because he believed himself to be inadequate or unqualified. God called Jeremiah to enter the arena as a young person from a rejected family.

What are we waiting for?

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: What reasons do you give for not speaking up, for not taking yourself seriously? How much of that is socially constructed or learned from family dynamics or social settings? What would it take for you to find your voice and speak up?

Personal Reconstruction: How might you be "set apart" or unique as an individual? Take some time articulating how you think you've been positively shaped into the person you are today. How have you seen God "backing you up every inch of the way" in the past?

Public Deconstruction: What labels in society do you think need to be deconstructed? Jeremiah's call as a prophet is to oppose all of the "containers" imposed on him by his society. What misconceptions do you feel yourself brushing up against as you try to fulfill your part in the Kingdom of God?

Public Reconstruction: What do you feel called to "build" or "plant" in your family, neighborhood, locally in Knoxville? What in your life requires prophetic vision to believe in or actively reconstruct in public? How can you tangibly bring newness to your community?

2. The Prophetic Cycle (Jer. 2:1-6:30)

*“Go stand at the crossroads and look around.
Ask for directions to the old road,
The tried-and-true road. Then take it.
Discover the right route for your souls.
But they said, ‘Nothing doing.
We aren’t going that way.’*

Jeremiah 6:16 MSG

Everywhere you look in this world there are scripts.

The recurring argument with a parent, spouse, or child has a set, repeating pattern.
Political debates and news cycles have recurring themes.
A team can get stuck in a drought or hit a winning streak.
Families can inherit patterns of anger, abuse, or addiction the way others pass down eye color.

The prophets also followed some version of a script - **a prophetic cycle**.
God raises Israel’s awareness to a problem, a social or spiritual wrong.
The prophet offers two choices: change or suffer the consequences.
There’s always the possibility for reform and hope.
But people must first grieve and realize the effects of their behavior before real change is possible.

Jeremiah uses several “scripts” to try to convey Judah’s situation.
They have played the unfaithful spouse.
Run-away children.
Impure, useless metal.
Maybe you can find more.

Toward the end of this series of prophetic cries, Jeremiah begs his people to reflect on their lives, to make the necessary changes.
Jeremiah proposes the opposite of Robert Frost at the crossroads:
take the ancient path, the long-established road that God has paved.
But the do-it-yourself, prosperity-seeking Israelites won’t do it.
They flatly decline to change when confronted with their waywardness.

When the prophetic vision shines a light on our own inadequacy, our own failures, our own self-deception, our first inclination is to double down, strengthen our resolve.
It seems as though it is a national pastime to pass the buck.
When confronted with America’s original sin of racism, instead of mourning and listening, some bristle and declare individual innocence.
When inequity becomes apparent, people opt for what-about-isms and their own list of grievances over compassion and empathy.
When others are mistreated or unprotected, our instinct is to find blame while forgetting to find a way to make it right.
When push comes to shove, we typically spoil ourselves, waste time, or choose entertainment over justice and generosity.

The question remains: What will we do when the prophetic gaze glances our direction?
Will we choose the tried and true path back to the way it was intended to be?
Or will we refuse to acknowledge our part in the brokenness of this world?

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: What cycles of life have shaped your journey? How have family patterns or personal attitudes impacted your ability to know the truth about yourself and your world? What alluring myths or self-deceptions are most tempting for you to believe and who whispers them to you?

Personal Reconstruction: What does the old, tried-and-true road look like for you? What would it take for you to disrupt the personal or family cycle you were born into? What habits can you create to break patterns of self-destruction in your life?

Public Deconstruction: What national, political, religious myths have gripped your life at one point or another? What social ills do you bristle at on the news or try to shirk responsibility when you hear about them? Who stands to gain by your participation or belief in a narrative other than the Kingdom of God?

Public Reconstruction: What tangible steps can you take to make your neighborhood or city begin to overcome past or current brokenness? Where do you notice the need for wholeness on your street, office space, or school? How can you publicly and demonstrably be a witness to another way of living?

3. An Unholy Alliance (Jer. 7.1-8:3)

Get smart! Your leaders are handing you a pack of lies, and you're swallowing them! Use your heads!

Jeremiah 7:8 MSG

What should we call a theology that claims that there is no threshold we could cross that would incur some kind of punishment for bad behavior?

Walter Brueggeman calls this kind of belief **presumptive theology**.

It is the presumption that our identity as "the People of God" outweighs our responsibility to live into that calling or face the consequences for resting on our laurels.

In Jeremiah's time, the Temple sat right next to the royal palace.

King Solomon, David's son, wanted it this way.

What might be hard for some of us to imagine (or not so hard) was the linkage between the political expression of God's people and their religious convictions.

The King was YHWH's son (Psalm 2) and represented God's sovereignty.

In a national crisis, the King might go to the Temple to hear from God (2 Kings 19:1-3).

The Temple and the Palace were inseparable.

It turns out, like mayonnaise and coffee, religion and politics don't mix well.

The people of Jerusalem had come to the historic conviction that it didn't matter what they did in the public square because God would bail them out.

YHWH would not destroy his own Temple, so comfortably situated next to the seat of power.

But God, through Jeremiah, wanted to disabuse them of this idea with extreme prejudice.

The infidelity of the people, their failure to live into their mission as God's people, would not be absolved because YHWH lived down the street.

Jeremiah stands at the entrance of this busy shop of sacrifices, the heartbeat of the religion, and exposes the lie.

Sacrifice without social responsibility is meaningless.

The sanctuary has become a hideout for political extremists and rebels.

God even tells Jeremiah not to pray for the people because they're beyond the pale.

That's a scary thought.

It's hard not to consider the parallels between Temple-nationalism and our own plight.

It seems more and more likely these days that those claiming to be citizens of heaven are more likely to take up arms against a neighbor to defend their national citizenship.

The stereotypical Christian, the kind caricatured on *Saturday Night Live*, is more likely to believe in American exceptionalism than the radical exceptionalism of God's Kingdom being made manifest.

More dangerous would be the confusion or conflation of the two.

It's become possible to believe that God has a special mission for America, while also denying the possibility that this mission might involve caring for immigrants, the aged, the orphan, the poor, or those without a voice in the system.

Both pastors and politicians have claim that being a member of a particular nation and being exceptional are religious facts endowed by God.

To question this is both heresy and treason.

To them and us, Jeremiah says: **Don't believe the lies.**

Exceptionality is not inherent.

It must be lived.

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: How were you taught to consider the relationship between politics and faith? Were the expressed ideas equivalent to the lived reality? Was there a confusion between "right politics" and "right belief" or was it possible to not fit into the partisan political system? Do you still tend to believe that a particular political party represents the correct way of being in the world for people of faith? Why? Would you be willing to think more critically about these things?

Personal Reconstruction: What would it look like to break the mold when it comes to politics and faith? How would you express your political convictions without equating that position with religious truth? What practices can you enact that would force you to see the complexity of the world more clearly and hold beliefs more loosely?

Public Deconstruction: What leaders, religious or political, do you need to tune out? How can you creatively and compassionately expose the cognitive dissonance between belief and action in our society? Where do you see that play out in your city, street, or suburb?

Public Reconstruction: What do you think takes the place of the unholy alliance between religion and power in this country? What alternatives can you be a part of or foster that explore the nuances of our public lives? How can you bring more grace and understanding and peace into public discourse and national or local politics? How can you create an environment where learning supersedes indoctrination?

4. Crying Lessons (Jer. 8:4-9:25)

*Are there no healing ointments in Gilead?
Isn't there a doctor in the house?
So why can't something be done
to heal and save my dear, dear people?
I wish my head were a well of water
and my eyes fountains of tears
So I could weep day and night
for casualties among my dear, dear people.*

Jeremiah 8:21-9:1 MSG

We struggle with at least two equal and opposite challenges as we try to make our way in the world at this moment.

The first dilemma is that we live in a complex world and are bombarded every minute, in real time, with every possible tragedy occurring in the world. Social media and 24-hour cable news have made it possible to be irritated, aware, and crushed by every oppressive dictator, human rights crisis, natural disaster, and scandal on the planet.

Although such knowledge of good and evil may, at times, contribute positively to necessary changes, it's fairly established that our brains and souls just aren't built to handle that kind of incessant barrage of information and complexity.

What's worse, so many voices chide and scold us for not caring enough.

It's not enough.

It's never enough.

There are always broken systems, people, attitudes, policies, and politicians who need reformation, judgment, punishment, or cancelation.

And we are pressured to respond to every crisis equally, as if we could fix it all by posting our concern about it on the internet.

Nadia Bolz-Weber uses the metaphor of a fuse box built for an old apartment building trying to handle the wattage of modern electrical usage: *"[M]y emotional circuit breaker keeps overloading because the hardware was built for an older time."*

Problem number one: *we simply cannot fully take in all the brokenness of the world.*

The second challenge is related to the first: **Cynicism. Compassion fatigue.**

If and when we short-circuit from media overload, crumbling relationships, or our own personal stressors, it's possible that we just shut down.

We stop caring because what good does the hand-wringing do?

We expect the worst from people and find those biases confirmed in everyone.

The world is too messy, too corrupt, too evil, too broken to hope for its healing.

What's the point?

Who has the energy anymore?

Jeremiah would have us believe that YHWH, the God of Israel, did and does.

Jeremiah and God feel so deeply for the state of their broken world that they wish for a physical reconfiguration of the human body to weep, cry, mourn, and lament its state adequately.

They wish for a hardwiring update to the human spiritual and emotional system that is capable of processing and feeling the weight.

But that hasn't happened yet.

So we have to learn how to cry correctly.

In Jeremiah 9:17-18 (The Message) God asks the people to artificially supplement their emotional systems to get the ball rolling:

*Look over the trouble we're in and call for help.
Send for some singers who can help us mourn our loss.
Tell them to hurry—
to help us express our loss and lament,
Help us get our tears flowing,
make tearful music of our crying.*

It's very human to not be able to bear the weight of the world.

Our inability to appropriately pay attention to pain and process grief is the bug in our software.

Sometimes we need help from others to remember how to cry over a broken creation.

Sometimes we need to remember that we aren't capable of caring enough about everything to fix it.

There is no balm in Gilead, to answer Jeremiah's question, that fixes it.

But there is a God who is willing to mourn the brokenness, carry it, and, against all odds, bring healing to it.

*“Don’t let the wise brag of their wisdom.
Don’t let heroes brag of their exploits.
Don’t let the rich brag of their riches.
If you brag, brag of this and this only:
That you understand and know me.
I’m God, and I act in loyal love.
I do what’s right and set things right and fair,
and delight in those who do the same things.
These are my trademarks.”
God’s Decree.*

Jeremiah 9:23-24 (MSG)

Our calling isn't necessarily to heal the world.
Our calling is to mimic the One we believe is and will ultimately bring about that healing.

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: What voices, be they media outlets or or social media personalities, do you trust to point your attention to the things that matter? Why these sources? Do you tend to believe that it's your job to put out every fire in the world? Do you tend toward a fatigued apathy over the state of the world? What personal experiences have led to these inclinations?

Personal Reconstruction: What if your deconstruction of the brokenness in politics, religion, the economy, etc. didn't mean that you had to throw it all away? What pieces of your past or present experiences do you want to keep, even if they are tied to environments that caused you harm? What could be redeemed? What needs to stay deconstructed for you?

Public Deconstruction: What structures, groups, or relationships do you need to publicly and decisively walk away from because of their contribution to the world's brokenness? What would it take for you to shine a light on the ways you have been a part of the brokenness due to past or present participation in unjust systems or broken ideologies?

Public Reconstruction: What manifestation of brokenness is actually yours to care about and act upon in the world? What's going on in yourself, in your house, on your street, or in your workplace or school that you are in a position to influence? What's the next right thing in that context? What do you want to create that could make a difference?

5. Re-Enchanting the World (Jer. 10:1-25)

*I know, God, that mere mortals
can't run their own lives,
That men and women
don't have what it takes to take charge of life.*

Jeremiah 10:23 MSG

The Disney movie *Onward* tells the story of a fictional world that was once enchanted and full of magic, but eventually became ordinary as creatures began depending on technology and unoriginal social roles. Much of the movie is about the attempt of two brothers to discover in themselves the possibility for that magic to be rediscovered and lived out in the ordinary, not in an escape from it.

Jeremiah echoes this plea for a re-enchantment in ancient Israel.

Jeremiah 10 is the prophetic magnum opus of mocking our tendency toward idolatry. The prophet creates a caricature of the idol-worshipper. He traces the creation of the worshipped item from tree to image. Jeremiah is unquestionably making fun of someone for a belief that they are enacting, even if they would never explain their behavior in those terms.

Which is the point.

We tend to think of idolatry as worshipping an item, a thing, stuff. It's easy for us to mock people for praying to a wood carving or stone statue.

Until we realize that we practically do the same thing.

We would never say that we are worshipping when we binge-watch a show, scroll our phones for an hour, stock up on merchandise from a politician, endlessly consume the next SUV, home remodel, or smartphone, or objectify another person.

But all of those acts are unquestionably worship acts.

David Foster Wallace once said: *"There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."*

Our problem is that much of our worship is completely unconscious. That's what Jeremiah is honing in on.

No one with a wooden depiction of a god or goddess really believes that thing is the deity itself. But their behavior in the world betrays them as the economic consumers, seekers of sensual stimuli, and power-hungry control freaks.

Jeremiah teaches us that to live unconsciously un-enchanted lives will not only kill us, but numb us to the original wonder of life we were meant to enjoy.

We can only start living more consciously, less-idolatrous lives when we realize our appropriate smallness.

Our paths are not always ours to choose.

We don't usually have much control over our lives or world.

Jeremiah 10:24 (*The Message*) concludes by asking Yahweh:

So correct us, God, as you see best.

Don't lose your temper. That would be the end of us.

We need to come to the end of our dependencies, our constructions, our idols.

That typically only happens though when we or someone else comes in with a sledgehammer to smash them.

May we have the courage to ask:

Correct us, God, but in measure.

Not in justified anger, lest we be reduced to nihilism.

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: What constructed entities have you devoted time and resources to unconsciously? How have you been enmeshed in destructive behaviors or "worship cycles" based on your family of origin, experiences, or social, economic, political, or religious locations in life? What would it look like to wake up from those constructed realities?

Personal Reconstruction: What habits can you reconstruct to make you more aware or conscious of what you choose to worship, what you give your life away to? How much of the old ways of living are reusable? How much needs to be scrapped?

Public Deconstruction: What in larger Christian or American cultures needs to be unmasked as "second-hand living" idolatry? In what ways could your story be told publicly to make our self-deceptions and unconscious worship more apparent?

Public Reconstruction: What in the public arena can you reallocate time or resources toward that resists these larger cultural "idolatries?" How can your life be a site of resistance that calls others to live more intentionally? Think about the rhythms of your neighbors, coworkers, and friends. What are you being called to build as a safe place of recreation in your life for those around you?

6. Lamenting Conspiracy Theories (Jer. 11:1-13:27)

*So, Jeremiah, if you're worn out in this footrace with men,
what makes you think you can race against horses?
And if you can't keep your wits during times of calm,
what's going to happen when troubles break loose
like the Jordan in flood?
Those closest to you, your own brothers and cousins,
are working against you.
They're out to get you. They'll stop at nothing.
Don't trust them, especially when they're smiling.*

Jeremiah 12:5-6 MSG

Whether you like it or not, we all have a little bit of a conspiracy theorist in us.
We all possess cognitive quirks and brain biases that trick us into false assumptions and the perception of order when there's really just chaos.
It's not just that our minds are out to get us, though.
Our environment, the people we hang out with, all play some role in shaping our view of the world.

Jeremiah's job was to alter the cognitive landscape of his friends and fellow Israelites.
His mission was to remind them of the covenant, the solemn promise, their ancestors had made with YHWH, the God of Israel, long ago.

But God warns him:

A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
They have returned to the iniquities of their fathers of old, who refused to heed My words (Jer. 11:9-10).
God actually goes as far as saying not to pray for them, because their willingness to live contrary to the covenant prohibits them from the posture of humility required to change.
The only thing left to do is expose the lie, teach the truth of the covenant.

We're only told later how Jeremiah proclaims this message using symbolic acts (Jer. 13).

But first, we overhear his dialogue with God (Jer. 12:1-2):

*You will win, O YHWH, if I make my claim against You,
Yet I shall present my charges against you anyway:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why are workers of treachery at ease?
...You are present in their mouths,
But far from their thoughts.*

Jeremiah is literally taking God to court over the injustices he is witnessing.

And, apparently, that's just fine.

YHWH can handle the heat.

Actually, God gives it right back to Jeremiah.

It's ok for the prophet to panic.

It's acceptable for Jeremiah to complain to God.

But this can't be the only emotion clouding the prophetic imagination.

Because things can always get worse.

YHWH tells Jeremiah, this is just the tip of the iceberg of human deception.

Conspiracy theories abound, making it impossible for Israel to perceive God's reality.

The worst is yet to come: **destruction, exile, captivity.**

This part is just the footrace.

Jeremiah will eventually have to enter the Kentucky Derby on foot.

Because of the belief in lies, the people continue to double down until their false reality is revealed for the sham it is.

Sometimes it takes the inferno of our own constructions to provide the light by which we see.

And God is very much a part of helping us strike the match.

We may complain and lament to God.

We may demand justice.

But we must also ask for the strength to see past our own deceptions, in addition to the prevailing lies in society.

Because we can never really know which side of the conspiracy we're on.

To live a prophetic story, we must have humility, compassion, and a willingness to second-guess ourselves.

Because certainty and quick answers are the substance of flat-earth and fake moon-landing beliefs.

Jeremiah is never free to stop proclaiming the message. That's the gig.

And even when God claims that the people's ability to hear the truth is a lost cause, God never calls Israel a lost cause.

There's still the belief that once the lie is deconstructed, newness can emerge.

We all have brains that take shortcuts, make assumptions, and work in irrational ways.

We all live in environments that make certain things easier to believe.

The sooner we realize that, and stop treating loved ones who have adopted conspiratorial beliefs as lost causes, the better we may be at curbing the destructive beliefs and getting a more hopeful message across.

We're all human after all.

Well, except for the lizard people.

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: Have you ever believed a conspiracy theory or been duped into believing something false? What was that experience like? Have you ever discovered that a personal belief wasn't true? What did it take for you to see past that? In what areas are you personally prone to believe that someone holds the secret to the mess we're in? How far are you willing to go to question the beliefs you currently hold about the world?

Personal Reconstruction: What would it look like for you to go to God with your doubt, complaints, and deconstruction? How and what would you vocalize? What habits or practices can you implement to cultivate a more humble, compassionate lifestyle when it comes to the people in your life you believe to be living under some kind of false pretense?

Public Deconstruction: What societal lies out there are you personally equipped to bust because of your training or experience? What do you identify as the most dangerous, common falsehoods prevalent in our area or culture? Why do you think people tend to find these narratives compelling?

Public Reconstruction: What would it take to create some kind of public dialogue where people could agree to doubt their deeply held convictions, hear each others' stories, and reassess the way they interpret the world? Where, if anywhere, could you be a part of cultivating a space that honored both the truth and the psychological shortcomings we all have in perceiving reality? What would that look like?

7. Prophetic Isolation (Jer 14:1-15:21)

Led by you, I went off by myself.

You'd filled me with indignation. Their sin had me seething.

But why, why this chronic pain,

this ever worsening wound and no healing in sight?

You're nothing, God, but a mirage,

a lovely oasis in the distance—and then nothing!

This is how God answered me:

"Take back those words, and I'll take you back.

Then you'll stand tall before me.

Use words truly and well. Don't stoop to cheap whining.

Then, but only then, you'll speak for me.

Let your words change them.

Don't change your words to suit them.

Jeremiah 15:17b-19 MSG

A drought, a natural disaster (Jeremiah 14).

A political scandal, a national disaster (Jeremiah 15).

For people who believed that YHWH brought the rain and kept them safe, the gloves were off.

These chapters of Jeremiah are pretty raw.

Scholars identify some of these poems where Jeremiah laments as "confessions."

His personal pain acknowledged to God and uttered in extreme pain in duress.

At one point, Jeremiah laments that his mother even bore him (Jer. 15:10).

The back and forth in these chapters are exhausting.

To quote Billy Joel in "Summer, Highland Falls," ***it's either sadness or euphoria.***

It's clear that the people have left God behind; they're doing their own thing.

But the punishment seems too great to conceive.

Jeremiah sees the carnage daily.

Society's turned upside down.

There's a volley that goes back and forth between despair and promise.

Just how do the consequences of brokenness work in this world?

How far does repentance go into absolving you of paying the penalties of misdeeds?

What Jeremiah seems to be witnessing is the struggle between God's justice being meted out and a concern for God's public image.

Several times the plea goes out: Act for the sake of your reputation, at least (Jer. 14:7, 21).

The tension exists because people have hurt and misled others and need to be held accountable.

But the public failure of God's people gives a really bad image to their God, YHWH.

How does God do the right thing while also saving face?

Jeremiah goes as far to call God an untrustworthy source of life.

Just when you think you've arrived and can get a drink, poof. Gone.

Amazingly, God responds.

Tells Jeremiah to 1) change his mind (repent) about how all this looks and 2) make something beautiful out of the scrap heap.

There seems to be a crisis brewing in American evangelical culture.

The idea is that much of what qualifies for religious experience over the last 100 years or so is a deconstructable mess of cultural influences, corrupt leaders, and political strategizing.

Very little coming from the Story of Scripture.

When we dissect all the pieces that amount to a faith experience in this country, many have discovered the corpse of that belief to be dead on arrival, unable to be resurrected.

Maybe they're right.

Or maybe only partly.

Maybe the death was a necessary one.

After all, that's usually how resurrection works.

Maybe being faithful is just that: remaining faithful, holding the line, stubbornly resisting.

Maybe deconstructing, holding people who have abused and misled accountable, is part of restoring God's PR, part of getting rid of all the human-made stuff.

There is peril in adopting the prophetic imagination.

But YHWH promises here that our back is covered.

That we can be spokespeople for something right out of the worthless failures.

But that will require a change of mind and heart.

We'll need to reframe the interaction between God, the world, humans, and the church.

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: Can you name a time when you were embarrassed to be a Christian because of the behavior of other Christians? Can you say that you've deconstructed a belief or your whole theology before? Who did this with or for you? What has been the fruit of that process?

Personal Reconstruction: Jeremiah is called to speak up out of the mess, producing something noble out of it. If you have one, what's your story of deconstruction? How can you make something redeeming out of that experience of falling or failure? What's the deeper meaning for you?

Public Deconstruction: There are a lot of people out there claiming to speak for God. How can you publicly deconstruct mechanisms, structures, policies, or groups who are claiming to do good but causing harm? What narratives do those causing damage wield to get their way? How can you shine a light on this?

Public Reconstruction: There are a lot of people who are deconstructing, particularly American "exvangelicals." Their stories are important. What failed systems have you been a part of that you are uniquely equipped to help reconstruct? How can you make something beautiful out of a failed relationship, religious experience, goal, or dream?

8. Embodying the Message (Jer 16:1-20:18)

*You pushed me into this, God, and I let you do it.
You were too much for me.
And now I'm a public joke.
They all poke fun at me...*

*But if I say, "Forget it!
No more God-Messages from me!"
The words are fire in my belly,
a burning in my bones.
I'm worn out trying to hold it in.
I can't do it any longer!*

Jeremiah 20:7, 9 MSG

How much of our lives are shaped by forces beyond our control?
Our birthplace.
Our family of origin.
Our upbringing.
Our natural abilities.
Our privileges.

What is freedom? How free are we?

Philosophers and theologians alike have puzzled over these questions.
The jury is mostly still out.
A lot of life is determined by some factors, freedom exists within a spectrum.

Jeremiah complains to God in another one of his "confessions."
Literally he says YHWH enticed him into the prophetic gig, but overcame him with the stresses of the job.
Standing for truth or siding with God always seems to be a glorious endeavor.
The reality is much more difficult.

Jeremiah wonders out-loud if he could finagle his way out of it, quit the prophetic mission.
Alas, some things run even deeper than deterministic contexts or personal freedom.
Jeremiah's hand has already been dealt and there's no quitting.
Somewhere in the middle of Jeremiah's despair, he realizes that God is with him (20:11).
But the shame, angst, and depression are still there, still real.

Jeremiah is stuck between his calling and his freedom.

We've likely all been in some version of this situation.
Telling the truth cost us something.
Someone gaslit us for believing something rational.
Someone conspired against us for trying to do the right thing.
Someone mischaracterized a complex situation to make us look bad.

What's amazing is that vocalizing and articulating this experience is part of a prophetic, faithful experience of life.

It not only belongs, but is to be expected in faith.

Which should lead us to question why so much of contemporary religious experience, perhaps most notably American expressions of Christianity, would lead us to consider such expression dangerous.

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: What was your religious experience when it comes to doubt? What do you believe about the contingency of the world? Are we the products of our environment? How free are we to chart our own paths? How drastically do you think the scales tip between contingency and freedom?

Personal Reconstruction: What is the fire in your bones? What, despite deconstruction, do you feel to be a part of you, something you can't shake or let go of? How can you articulate this positively?

Public Deconstruction: What groups or entities do you perceive to be the most uncomfortable with deconstruction or questioning our place in the world or the order of society? What do certain groups or people stand to lose by encouraging people to understand that the world is complex and contingent and that choices emerge from complicated situations in the world? Who stands to gain by silencing certain deconstructing voices?

Public Reconstruction: These chapters are full of Jeremiah performing sign-acts to symbolize the dangers of what would happen to God's People if they didn't start questioning their actions. What positive manifestations can you put out into the world to encourage a deconstructive/reconstructive approach? Where are you positioned to use your experience to help others find their place and calling in a complex world?

9. Drunk with Power (Jer 21:1-25:38)

Doom to the shepherd-leaders who butcher and scatter my sheep!" God's Decree. "So here is what I, God, Israel's God, say to the shepherd-leaders who misled my people: 'You've scattered my sheep. You've driven them off. You haven't kept your eye on them. Well, let me tell you, I'm keeping my eye on you, keeping track of your criminal behavior. I'll take over and gather what's left of my sheep, gather them in from all the lands where I've driven them. I'll bring them back where they belong, and they'll recover and flourish. I'll set shepherd-leaders over them who will take good care of them. They won't live in fear or panic anymore. All the lost sheep rounded up!

Jeremiah 23:1-4 MSG

Chapters 21-25 of Jeremiah describe a recurring nightmare of stubborn, short-sided leaders, steering a group of people toward a cliff.

Jeremiah has the unfortunate message of announcing God's message to his loyal Israelite patriots, that God would have them surrender to their Babylonian enemies rather than fight for their freedom.

If you're in the middle of a war, some people call that treason.
But it was the message Jeremiah had to deliver from on high.
Imagine telling your fellow Americans that God's advice was to surrender to an enemy.
The American dream is over.
Get used to being further down the food chain.

The problem was that Jerusalem was the capital of a tiny kingdom with delusions of grandeur.
And this was the fault of the leaders.
For years (roughly 23), the kings of Judah had been playing Russian Roulette with God's promises.
They made and broke treaties regularly when it suited them and they likely invoked YHWH's name each time.
The kings had built a house of cards and as long as they were in charge, they didn't care who got hurt in the process.
But their abusive regime would soon be over.

Later on, in Jeremiah 25, God gives Jeremiah a metaphorical cup of wine and tells him to go get all the nations drunk.
Let them drink from the cup of God's anger until they staggered and vomited.
The party would start with Judah and Jerusalem.
But any nation who pretended to stand in God's place would eventually be over-served.

No kingdom lasts forever.

Jeremiah rudely reminds us of this reality.
This upsets most people.
Particularly, those who happen to be living in the dominant world power of the moment.
Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!
Something in human nature is ok with being taken in by the promise of power.
It's only after falling down that we find the grace to rise from that illusion.

God finally promises to offer a safe harbor for those who have been used and abused by these malignant monarchs.
It would eventually be Jesus who pitied his own people for being like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36).
He promised to be the good shepherd (John 10:11).
Whether or not his followers have always lived up to the billing, Jeremiah wishes us to know that God's intention is for the image bearers of God to be cared for, loved, and protected.

Questions:

Personal Deconstruction: How have you been affected by poor leadership, whether political or religious? When, if ever, have you become disillusioned with powerful rhetoric and hero myths? What do you still find alluring about these promises? Where are you most skeptical?

Personal Reconstruction: What next steps do you need to take in reconstructing an assessment of healthy leadership and community? Can you formulate a list of people that have earned your trust who you would trust to guide you in your journey? What do you think a healthy, functioning community should look like? Who could you help lead in a restorative way?

Public Deconstruction: What would a prophetic word in keeping with Jeremiah's message look like to American culture? What kinds of leadership structures would Jeremiah condemn today? Where do you see people disillusioned with leadership or community structures in this generation? What do they accurately diagnose? What do they miss? Where do you feel the call to step in and speak truth to power?

Public Reconstruction: What public forums or spheres can you help reform? Where are you currently and uniquely able to change a leadership paradigm or redirect towards healthy habits? What would it look like to create a culture of optimism and respect within existing structures where you live and work?

End of Part One

Part Two of this Guide will be released in
January.

Shalom

שלום