

## Lecture question and answer session

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Following his paper, Dr Wright opened the floor to questions from the audience...

**1. *If Jeremiah is in some sense modelling what it means to be missionaries, as a group or individuals, is this encouraging or discouraging with the experiences that Jeremiah has and how does this fit into the wider context of biblical prophecy?***

I hope that it would not be discouraging, but it would certainly be sobering. I think there is certainly a necessity for a prophetic critique of the church of the people of God. When we are thinking about mission, it is easy sometimes - especially in a place like this and elsewhere - to get fairly gung-ho about all the wonderful realities of church growth around the world, of great stories of successful mission and so on, for which we praise God. But we also need to recognise that there are some very terrible deformities in those who claim to be the people of God, especially within the evangelical communities around the world. Things that make us wonder if the judgement of God is as much against the church as against the world; things like: lack of integrity, like a prosperity gospel, all sorts of ways in which one finds deformities in the Christian church.

So there is a need for a sobering, prophetic critique of the church, but I wouldn't want to be discouraging. I would want to be encouraging because the overall message of Jeremiah is that if the church is willing to go through that purifying period of God's discipline and judgement, there is grace, there is restoration and there is ultimately the hope that God will complete his mission. God will do what he says he will do, which is to gather in the people from all the nations. We can be grateful that the completion of God's mission lies ultimately in God's hands and is not dependent upon our obedience in the sense that it is his grace which is ultimately sovereign.

**2. *If Jeremiah 29 is encouraging us to seek the shalom of Babylon, what is Babylon in today's context and in what sense should we be seeking the prosperity of a system that may be corrupt?***

A very good question. We need to remember that Jeremiah wasn't writing those words with some kind of rose-tinted glasses of what Babylon was like, because the next postbag contains chapters 50 and 51 which were his comprehensive radical judgement on Babylon as a system. In every respect Babylon stood under the judgement of God, so we need to interpret his words to the exiles to seek the peace of Babylon not necessarily in terms of simply acquiescing to the empire and idolatry of Babylon, but in seeking the shalom and the blessing of the people who are there, their neighbours and so on. I would see the book of Daniel, especially the first six chapters, as in some respects reflecting somebody actually doing what Jeremiah said. We have no proof, of course, that Daniel and his friends had read the letter that Jeremiah sent to the exiles, but I like to imagine that it is very possible. Certainly Daniel tells us in chapter 9 that he was reading the book of Jeremiah. So there you have a group of young men who in the stories of Daniel did accept living in Babylon, they settled there, they accepted Babylonian names, Babylonian education, Babylonian jobs. They served the king and they did so with integrity and honesty, but they did not compromise their faith and they stayed faithful, and were even prepared to die if necessary. So I think that is both sides of your point, that we are called to live in a world system and not to idolise it and not to be dazzled by it and not to treat it as absolute and to live and serve within it with integrity and yet also to recognise those idolatrous dimensions of it and to resist them.

**3. *Jeremiah 29 again forms the physical centre-piece of the scroll - is that significant? Secondly, engagement with the public arena was an important part of Jeremiah's ministry and it is also an important dimension of mission, which you haven't explored. Could you say something about that?***

On the first point, this is a fascinating thought which never occurred to me before, but I will let it run around in my head, this sense that chapter 29 is pivotal in the scroll. You are quite right, of course, it does come central. I do treat it as a very important chapter, I preach on it quite a lot and, especially in contexts where people are tempted to try and escape the context they are in, especially in many other parts of the world, where people are just trying to get out from where they are, to get away from situations of struggle in so many part of the non-western world. They want to get to heaven when they die, or to America if they can't get to heaven. This message, be where you are, God has put you there is very powerful. So I think chapter 29 has a lot to say.

On the second point, I agree with you actually, maybe I need to work further on that. You may have gathered that I actually am working on the book of Jeremiah with the plan of producing a Bible Speaks Today replacement volume for the Derek Kidner one and IVP have asked me to do that, so I am hoping to bring a missional interpretation as I work on the book. I think the strong element of Jeremiah being a prophet to the public arena, to the kings, to the institutions of society, is important and therefore there is a prophetic role that the Christian church should have to the public arena, as well as challenging ordinary people about their lives and their idolatries and their ethics and so on.

**4. *You have talked a lot about the communal level. Are there other insights from Jeremiah to the individual level?***

Well, yes of course there are, in a sense by implication, in that if God calls upon the nation to repent and change its way and stop oppressing the poor and the widows and orphans, chapter 7 and so on, then that has to be a message which is taken seriously by individual Israelites. They have to respond both at the national level, but individuals had to do it too. There are also one or two messages for specific individuals that come in the book, but they tend to be more at a national level, like kings and false prophets and so on. So I don't want to underplay the importance of this coming down to an individual level, but I was trying to say that we tend, I think, perhaps particularly in a more individualised society and the individualism of evangelical Christianity in general, to think of mission in terms of evangelism and evangelism in terms of the individual called to conversion, which of course is true. I am not opting out of it in any sense, but when we reduce our concept of mission and evangelism to 'me and my sin problem and my need to get saved and go to heaven', we are blinkered in the totality of what the Bible says is the ultimate mission of God, through his promise to Abraham, through the people of Israel, through the coming of the Messiah, through the expansion of the gospel to the nations and, ultimately to the whole of creation. I didn't even get creation in here, although there is a lot about creation in the book of Jeremiah and I want to add that into these reflections. So that the ultimate purpose of God is a restored and redeemed creation and, guess what?, we get to be part of it through faith in Christ. That is the way Paul puts it in Colossians 1, "*All things are created in Christ, are sustained by Christ, including the church which is his body of which he is head and all things will be reconciled to God through the blood of his cross.*" So from creation through the cross it is all things - *ta panta*, which means everything in heaven and earth which is the whole creation - is all cosmic redemption in the cross of Christ. And then Paul says, "*And you also*". Then he says, "*And that is the gospel*". So Paul's gospel is creation-wide and then 'I get to be in it', rather than being about me 'getting to heaven when I die, with a lot of other Christians who happen to be the church and we don't quite know what happens to the world in the end'. The biblical

mission and gospel seems to, in many ways, turn a lot of the way we tend to think upside down and inside out and maybe I am just trying to push that pendulum a bit too far.

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