



DIGGING DEEPER – WEEK 3

Cultural Cues

We cannot escape the haunting feeling as we turn the pages of Jeremiah: the days of his prophecy sound uncannily similar to ours. “The dominant elements of Jeremiah’s message are of paramount significance for his day and ours.”¹ While the symptoms may flesh out differently, the root problems of our modern culture profoundly parallel those of the nation of Judah. This article looks at the economic and political parallels as well as the social and religious ideas in their times and ours. Like the Judeans, we face a choice as individuals and as a nation to respond to God’s call to repentance.

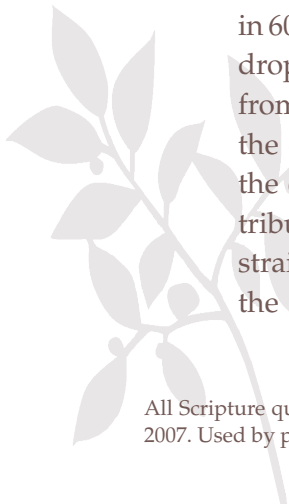
Economic Crisis

Long gone were the days of King David and King Solomon when Israel was a United Kingdom with wealth and power. Judah suffered economically during all the years that Jeremiah prophesied. Josiah ruled during Jeremiah’s early years of prophecy and enjoyed the most political and economic freedom because he followed God and made religious reforms. However, the Judean economy spiraled downward as the Egyptian pharaoh Neco deported Josiah’s son and then designated Jehoiakim to rule in 609 B.C. “This puppet of Neco acted as a vassal of Egypt for four years.”²

Conquering nations forced vassals to pay tribute. When Babylon came to Judah in 605, Judah traded one master for another as Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt and dropped in on Judah to drain the small country of all their treasures. Everything from the gold in the Temple to the young future leaders (including Daniel) exited the country, leaving an already tenuous economy destitute. “The deportation of the elite inevitably destabilized Judah.”³ To add insult to injury, “Jehoiakim paid tribute to Nebuchadnezzar and served three years as a Babylonian vassal.”⁴ The strain proved too great for Jehoiakim, and he rebelled against Babylon under the intense financial burden. Babylon struck back with military force, but Judah

Copyright © 2014 Abingdon Press. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.



managed to hold on for a few more years. Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, assumed the throne at his father's death but reigned just three months. In 597 B.C. the Babylonians seized Jerusalem, exiled the king and leading citizens, and set up Zedekiah as king.⁵ He, too, eventually refused to pay the exorbitant taxes, resulting finally in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

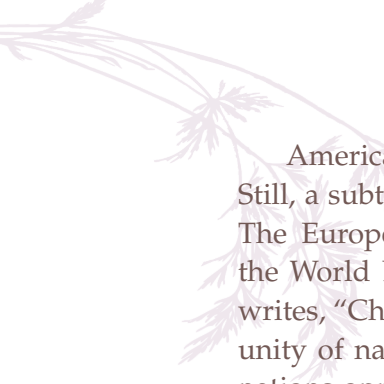
Judah's money troubles directly correlated to their rebellion against God. Though Babylon was the instrument used, God orchestrated the defeat (see Jeremiah 25:8-9). Although no military invasion by another country has rendered the United States a vassal nation, we still face an impending economic crisis. Many believe that this financial instability also stems from a lack of caution and obedience to God's messages. We have consistently lived beyond our means and now are paying "tribute" in the form of interest to other nations.

Our greed and materialism as families and as a nation have led us into a captivity of our own making. Proverbs 22:7 says, "The rich rule over the poor, / and the borrower is a slave to the lender" (HCSB). America continues enslaving itself to other nations by refusing to limit spending. Unfortunately, a day of reckoning always comes when debt continues to pile up. When the house of cards falls down, where does a country go to get a bankruptcy attorney? In the days of Jeremiah, the financial pressure led the people to look for man-made solutions through political alliances. Sadly, this also parallels our political situation today.

Political Globalization

The Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar was the center of the world at that time. "For nearly two thousand years, Babylon was the most important city in the world. It was the commercial and financial center for all Mesopotamia, the center of a geographical 'X' that linked the Orient with the Mediterranean and Egypt with Persia."⁶ As the Assyrian and Egyptian powers weakened, Babylon sought to conquer and unite an empire through brutal force. Nebuchadnezzar's lust for expansion and world dominance led to a vast kingdom that was a new world order in his day. Through the Book of Daniel we get a glimpse into the king's training and indoctrination of each vassal state's young leaders. There was unity all right, but it was Nebuchadnezzar's version of the pax romana that would be forced upon people six hundred years later by the Romans, not real peace.

To try to get out from under their money problems, Judah sought help from Egypt and surrounding nations. They tried to form alliances in the hopes of looking to collective power to overcome their fiscal enemies. "In 594 B.C., Zedekiah, who has been enthroned by Babylonia, made the tactical error of convoking in Jerusalem an anti-Babylonian conference of neighboring states, including Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon (Jeremiah 27:3)."⁷ God called His people to trust in Him instead of other nations for help, but they refused to listen.



America's globalization is not that of a tyrant taking the world by force. Still, a subtle undercurrent ushering in a new world order looms on the horizon. The European Union, interdependence of world markets and currencies, and the World Bank are just a few precursors to a global economy. David Jeremiah writes, "Christians should refrain from supporting political efforts that call for the unity of nations to achieve world peace—not only because the consolidation of nations opposes God's intent for mankind, but also because all attempts at man-made global peace are futile."⁸ He points out the prophet Jeremiah's words: "The heart is deceitful above all things / and beyond cure. / Who can understand it?" (17:9 NIV). Man-made peace will never happen because of the condition of our hearts. The utopian world politicians fantasize about is not possible on this side of heaven because of humanity's sinful nature. Judah looked to other nations for peace and ended up in exile. I pray we will learn from their mistakes and trust fully in the Lord of Heaven's Armies as we pray for our leaders, exercise our right to vote, and stay informed about what is going on in our country. May we be cautious not to view God through our politics but, instead, to understand our government through the lens of God's Word. Our ultimate hope for peace and security can't be found in any political party, system, or leader but in Christ alone.

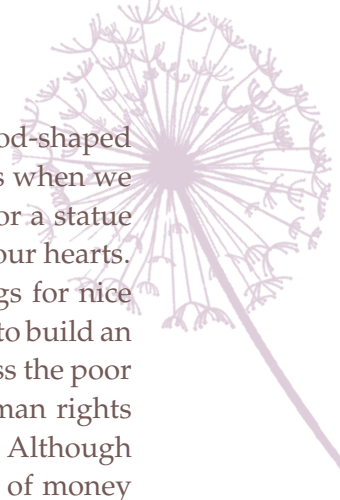


Social Materialism

Once a world superpower, Judah fell into obscurity and poverty in the days of Jeremiah. God's chosen people looked for security and fulfillment in things they could touch, taste, and feel. We read in Jeremiah, "From the least to the greatest, / their lives are ruled by greed. / From prophets to priests, / they are all frauds" (6:13). Their affection for the idols of their neighboring countries, lack of contentment, and desire for money evidences itself throughout Jeremiah's writings.

American culture parallels the social materialism of Judah's day. The prophets and priests were not just religious leaders but political advisors to the kings. In today's political arena of lobbyists, Ponzi schemes, and big government, we see many whose lives are "ruled by greed." Sadly, it is not just our politicians who struggle with self-indulgence. Socially, many people define themselves based on their salary, neighborhood, car, and vacations, looking down on others who have less no matter where they fall in the spectrum. Those with less money often grasp for an appearance of wealth, using debt to maintain their outward status. Adam Hamilton writes, "Our economy today is built on the concept of credit-itis. Unfortunately, it has exploited our lack of self-discipline . . . , wreaking havoc in our personal and national finances."⁹

The times of Jeremiah's prophecy found people looking to define themselves by what they owned as well. God cried out that the leaders of the day offered a superficial treatment for His people's mortal wound (Jeremiah 6:13-14; 8:11).



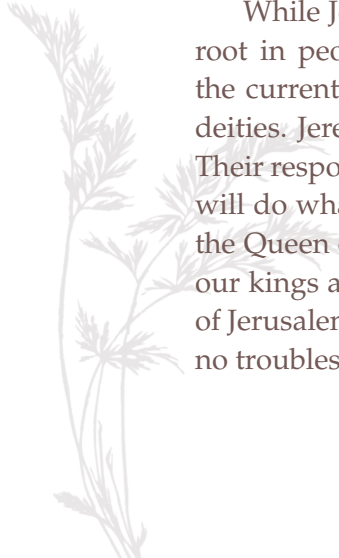
Today the same thing happens as we look to material goods to fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts. We put a bandage on the gaping wound of our souls when we find our identity in our possessions. The Judeans may have shopped for a statue to worship, but our consumerism can just as easily take God's place in our hearts.

The people of Judah also crossed moral lines to fulfill their cravings for nice things. King Jehoiakim was willing to use unjust means and forced labor to build an opulent palace for himself (Jeremiah 22:13-14). Today, people still oppress the poor in pursuit of wealth. Companies are willing to turn a blind eye to human rights violations, like human trafficking and child labor, for personal gain. Although the Bible finds no fault with wealth, it has much to say about the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10) and ultimate attachments to the things of this world (1 Corinthians 7:31). When greed controls us to a point of discarding human dignity, God is not slow to act. A day of reckoning came for the people of Judah. We can only ponder how long God's patience will hold out for our nation.

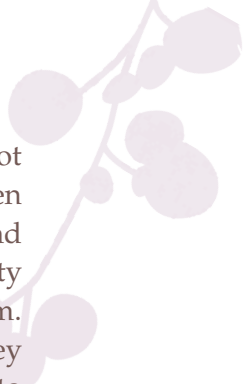
Religious Pluralism

Merriam-Webster defines pluralism as "a theory that there are more than one or more than two kinds of ultimate reality."¹⁰ The descendants of Abraham deviated from their religious neighbors with their monotheist belief in only one God. All the surrounding nations (Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and other smaller nations) practiced the polytheistic worship of many gods. God made it clear from the time of Creation that He was the one and only. His first two commandments given through Moses spoke of His exclusivity. No extra gods allowed, and no physical images should be made.

In Jeremiah's day a revival took place during King Josiah's reign. Workers found lost portions of the Book of Deuteronomy during Temple repairs that revealed how far the people had strayed from God's commands. "Concerning the religious reform of Josiah, Jeremiah appeared to support it initially with enthusiasm. Then disillusionment set in when the reform failed to inspire personal repentance. It dealt more with the externals of religion—form without substance."¹¹



While Josiah attempted to remove the shrines and idolatry, it didn't fully take root in people's hearts. They continued the Temple sacrifices but also enjoyed the current practice of adding foreign idol worship as well as sacrifices to other deities. Jeremiah recorded their worship to the Queen of Heaven among others. Their response to Jeremiah's call back to the true worship of Yahweh was this: "We will do whatever we want. We will burn incense and pour out liquid offerings to the Queen of Heaven just as much as we like—just as we, and our ancestors, and our kings and officials have always done in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For in those days we had plenty to eat, and we were well off and had no troubles!" (Jeremiah 44:17).



The people couldn't look back any further than their recent past. They forgot the days of the patriarchs, the Red Sea crossing, and the reign of King David when they saw God intervene mightily and dared not participate in the idolatry and polytheism of their neighbors. They saw worship as a means to an end (plenty to eat and no troubles) rather than a relationship with the One who made them. Not only did they tolerate other gods and forms of worship by foreigners; they embraced and syncretized new gods into their worship of Yahweh. They began to see worship of only one God as outdated, narrow-minded, and laughable in the face of modern enlightenment by surrounding nations. Sound familiar?

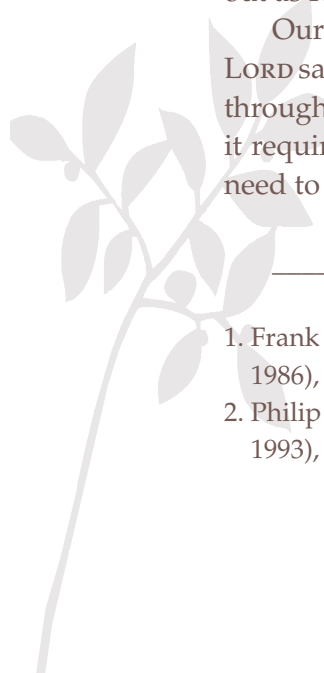
America's tolerance of every religious form and practice has tended in recent years to embrace all faiths except those that claim ultimate truth. Movies, music, and especially reality television mock the narrow-mindedness of Christ-following. Religious freedom is a basic tenet of our nation for which we are thankful. However, in many ways religious freedom and tolerance have seemed to cross the threshold into a kind of "mandatory pluralism" in our society. Inclusive religion supporting relative truth that doesn't claim to be the only right way seems to be the kind of religion that is truly welcomed. This flies in the face of the Bible's teaching that there is one God who gave us one way to come to Him: through His Son, Jesus.

Traditional Christians believe that Jesus is not one of many ways to know God; He is *the* way. The American church has experienced some small revival movements just as in the time of Josiah, yet a widespread repentance from our culture's moral decay hasn't taken root. Many still see God as a means to an end. Go to church on Christmas and Easter, drop a twenty in the offering plate, and pray it's enough to stay on God's good side. The American church trends away from the teachings of sin and repentance in favor of messages about peace and abundant life, rather than rightly balancing the two. Claiming Jesus Christ is the way to God and standing on moral absolutes based in God's Word makes us stick out as RI—religiously incorrect.

Our religious climate resonates greatly with the days of Jeremiah. "Then the LORD said, 'Broadcast this message in the streets of Jerusalem. Go from town to town throughout the land and say, "Remember the ancient covenant, and do everything it requires" ' " (Jeremiah 11:6). Amidst the religious pluralism of our culture, we need to remember the truths of the Bible and live out our faith in obedience.

1. Frank Gaebelien, *The Expositors Bible Commentary Volume 6* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 368.

2. Philip J. King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 21.



3. *Ibid.*, 23.
4. J. Andrew Dearman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 31.
5. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, general editor, "Jehoiachin" and "Jehoiakim" entries by Jeremiah Unterman (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 451-452.
6. Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1991), 21.
7. King, 24.
8. David Jeremiah, *The Coming Economic Armageddon: What Bible Prophecy Warns about the New Global Economy* (New York, Hachette Book Group, 2010), 43.
9. Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 16.
10. "Pluralism," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pluralism>.
11. King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion*, 12.

