

What Do You See, Jeremiah? – Part 1

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

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The message the Lord has for us today comes from the book of Jeremiah. The Lord asked the prophet Jeremiah a question. He said, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” Jeremiah lived during very turbulent times. He was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah and served, according to the dates given in the first chapter of his book, from the years 626 B.C. (the thirteenth year of King Josiah) through at least 586 B.C., which was the year of Nebuchadnezzar’s third and most destructive attack against Jerusalem. This would make Jeremiah a contemporary of Daniel, though he would have been about 20 years older than him. The prophet Ezekiel also lived during the period of the captivity of Judah.

Jeremiah, whose name means “Yahweh exalts,” had been called to the prophetic ministry from the womb. God said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah 1:5. Like others, including Moses, Jeremiah was diffident and shy, reluctant to take up the mantle of ministry. He gave evidence that his ordination to the ministry came at an early age. “Then said I: ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth.’” Jeremiah 1:6. The word “youth,” in Hebrew, can describe someone of late teens or early twenties. Many times God put those who were young to work for Him.

But the Lord encouraged him. “‘Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you,’ says the LORD. Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: ‘Behold I have put My words in your mouth.’ Moreover the word of the LORD came to me saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a branch of an almond tree.’ Then the LORD said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am ready to perform My word.’” Jeremiah 1:9, 11, 12.

When we first read these verses, the meaning might not seem immediately apparent, but there’s a beautiful message here that God would have us receive today. Oh, that we would see what Jeremiah saw that day! Oh, that we would catch the vision and grasp the lesson of the almond tree today! I hope that God’s message to Jeremiah will become deeply embedded in our minds. “I am ready to perform My word.” We used to have an almond tree in our yard. It’s no longer there, but there are two things I remember distinctly about it. I remember that when it was in blossom, it was glistening, brilliant white. I remember also that the blossoms came very early in the year.

This is not the first time an almond tree played a significant role in God's administration. To be able to see the significance of the almond in this previous setting, we need to go back for a moment and review something that happened about 1,000 years before Jeremiah.

If you remember, there was a time in Israel's past when, after they left Egypt, a rebellion was sparked by Korah, Dathan and Abiram. These were leading men of Israel. Dathan and Abiram were leaders, princes from the tribe of Reuben, who thought they deserved special attention since Reuben was the first born of Jacob. Korah was of the tribe of Levi which had been designated important roles in the keeping and transporting of the tabernacle. When the cloud of God's presence moved and signaled the time to pull up stakes, it was the family of Korah who had the responsibility for carrying the furniture of the tabernacle, including the ark of the covenant. Korah had been privileged to be among the "seventy" who were called to Mount Sinai when God uttered His holy law. Great had been the privileges and opportunities given to these three.

But like another before them, Lucifer, they had changed their opportunities and blessings into a curse by murmuring against God and wanting "more." Not satisfied with their position, they coveted the priesthood also. Their discontent led to jealousy against Moses and Aaron the high priest, charging them with being selfish and having led Israel into the wilderness so that when they died, Moses and his family could obtain their possessions! When you think about it, that's pretty ridiculous. After all, Moses had been heir to the throne, the wealth of all Egypt! His portfolio would have been more impressive than King Tut's. If attraction to worldly goods had been predominant in his life, he would have chosen to remain the son of Pharaoh's daughter and claimed his regal title rather than lead sheep in Midian and the sheep of Israel through the wilderness.

How sad it is when the spirit of Satan leads people into false accusations. Instead of rejoicing at the benevolence shown by God in leading them from slavery to freedom, instead of counting their blessings as they received from the desert floor the bread of heaven and drank water from the Rock, they chose to focus on the negative aspects of their condition and to find fault with their divinely appointed leaders. Every day could have been a "communion experience" as they drank living water from the Rock and ate living bread, but they chose another path.

Open rebellion ensued. Korah and his companions charged Moses and Aaron with appointing themselves to leadership and assuming the role of the priesthood by their own authority. Along with 250 key supporters, "They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, 'You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation?'" Numbers 16:3. In a very decisive way God answered the challenge brought by these rebels. The Lord "made a new thing" and opened the earth which swallowed the ringleaders of the rebellion.

You would think that that would be enough to bring the entire nation into solemn, repentant submission before God, but the very next day the spirit of murmuring arose again, with the

congregation charging Moses with putting to death God's people! There were two things inaccurate with that charge; Moses had nothing to do with the execution of the rebels; he had no power to make a rift, a chasm in the ground. It was God Who opened the earth. Secondly, those destroyed were not "the people of the Lord." They had given clear evidence that they had chosen another captain, Satan.

Nevertheless, God would make it clear whom it was He had chosen as priest. A demonstration would be provided. A representative from each of the tribes was invited to place his staff, his walking stick, with each man's name written on it, before the Lord in the tabernacle. God would Himself demonstrate His choice in a way that none could deny. "'And it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against you.'" So Moses spoke to the children of Israel, and each of their leaders gave him a rod apiece, for each leader according to their fathers' houses, twelve rods, and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses placed the rods before the LORD in the tabernacle of witness. Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds." Numbers 17:5-8.

The immediate lesson that God wanted the congregation to see was of course, the clarification of Aaron's divine appointment. But there is another very important lesson from that episode, which ties in directly with the question God had for Jeremiah when he pointed him to the almond tree. File in your mind this picture of the almond rod; we'll discuss that a little bit later.

Despite frequent messages of warning and reproof, the Judah of Jeremiah's day had lapsed into a state of stupor. They were spiritually asleep. The messages of the prophets had fallen on deaf ears. Leaders were not portraying godly principles in their administration. The throne had become corrupt and selfish. Justice had been dismissed from her courts, the judges receiving bribes in many cases. Violence and cruelty ruled the streets. Idolatry was practiced on every corner. Intemperance and debauchery characterized society. Immorality and infidelity crept into many households. Israel had become a far cry from the nation of righteousness God had designed.

Why did God show Jeremiah an almond tree in vision? There were two lessons that God wanted Jeremiah to learn by picturing before him an almond tree, and these two lessons God would have us learn today. The first is given in the response of God to Jeremiah's reply. "Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Jeremiah, what do you see?' And I said, 'I see a branch of an almond tree.' Then the LORD said to me, 'You have seen well, for I am ready to perform My word.'"

At first glance we might not be able to understand this conversation perfectly. That is because there is a very interesting play on words in these two verses which unfortunately doesn't appear in our English translations. The Amplified Bible does the best job of giving the sense of the words used. The term "almond" comes from the Hebrew shaqed, from the root shaqad which means literally "wakeful" or "watchful" and stems from the fact that where Jeremiah lived, it was the

first tree to blossom. So it was called the “wake-tree,” first to awaken from the slumber of winter. It was an “early-riser.” In Palestine, it is not uncommon for the almond to blossom in January.

In the next verse we find God’s response, which contains these words: “Then the LORD said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am ready to perform My word.’” The word translated “ready” is the Hebrew shaqad, which, as we noted, is closely related to the word in Hebrew for almond. God asked Jeremiah, “What do you see?” And Jeremiah said, “I see shaqed.” God said, “You have seen well. I am shaqad to perform My word.” To give an idea of what this would sound like in their language we might hear Jeremiah saying, “I see the twig of a wake-tree,” and God replying, “I am wakeful over my word to perform it.” Or, Jeremiah’s comment might have been, “I see the branch of a watch tree,” and God saying, “I am watching over My word to perform it.” The stress is on the certainty and nearness of God’s performing His promise. It is soon to happen. It’s going to take place before many realize it. Just as the almond was early to “rise” after winter, God would soon take action, earlier than many might think.

With this play on words in mind, compare the following English translations. The Contemporary English Bible has these verses, “The LORD showed me something in a vision. Then He asked, ‘What do you see, Jeremiah?’ I answered, ‘A branch of almonds that ripen early.’ ‘That’s right,’ the LORD replied, ‘and I always rise early to keep a promise.’”

The Amplified Bible reads, “Moreover, the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a branch or shoot of an almond tree [the emblem of alertness and activity, blossoming in late winter]. Then said the Lord to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am alert and active, watching over My word to perform it.’” The King James Version says, “Then said the LORD unto me, ‘Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it.’”

The message of the Lord to Jeremiah, by showing him the almond tree in vision was, “Don’t fall asleep now. It’s time to wake up. I’m ready to take action. I’m now ready to do what I’ve promised. It’s sooner than you think.” For years the messages of the prophets had encouraged the people to repent and turn to their Maker, or else His protective hand would be removed and they would receive the consequences of their choices. But because the judgments of the Lord had been delayed in mercy, they had misunderstood the delay and reacted as if things were just fine and that God approved their course of godless living. Jeremiah’s warnings of the Day of the Lord were dismissed by the populace with the thought, “Oh yeah, we’ve heard this before. How long have the prophets been telling us this?” “What do you see, Jeremiah?” The city would be awakened by the sword of Nebuchadnezzar, if not the voice of mercy.

The Church today finds herself in a similar position as did Judah of 25 centuries ago. One day follows another; one year follows another till we begin to feel, think and act as if this earth is our home. It is not. The word of our God clearly tells us that His plan is to bring to an end all things pertaining to this earth, and establish His kingdom which will last forever. The Church today is like the young women of Jesus’ parable, who because of the apparent delay in the return of the bridegroom, fell asleep. The message God gave to Jeremiah we need to hear today. “I am ready to

perform My word.” The difference is that the action God was going to take back then, through Nebuchadnezzar, was to effect a destruction of Jerusalem from which recovery was promised. The “tree” would be “chopped down,” but would sprout again. The action God is going to take now involves the final, total and complete end of all things in this present system. The Stone that is coming will grind up all earthly kingdoms into powder so fine that the wind will carry the fragments away forever.

We need to see the vision of Jeremiah! We need to have our eyes opened so that we can detect the providences of God at work in bringing His plan to completion. We need to catch the vision he was given. “What do you see, Jeremiah? What do you see, Church?” Present conditions in our world testify that what God had foreseen has truly come to pass. In our society today justice has been exiled. Corruption and greed flourish. Selfishness and carelessness are exalted. The picture of last day living as given by Paul in II Timothy 3 reads like today’s newspaper. Pre-flood violence splashes across the TV screens and movie theatres. Legislatures and courts take actions which violate the principles of marriage as outlined by God’s holy Book. We confess with David, “It is time for you to act, O Lord, for they have regarded Your law as void.” Psalm 119:126. Do you hear today talk of one-world government, one-world currency? We now learn that some of the new administration’s key appointees are very favorable to “trans-nationalism,” a term embracing a one-world order. God says, “What do you see? I am ready to perform My word.”

God will not delay forever. The day of grace and mercy will not last forever. Now the gates of Paradise beckon. Now the entrance of the ark stands ajar. Now the door of the sheepfold is open. But soon the tender Voice of appeal and invitation will no longer be heard. God will move. He will act. He will perform His Word. He will bring to an end the night of sin. “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

One of the devil’s most pernicious errors is to lull people to sleep in thinking that it will be a long time before God takes action. They don’t necessarily deny the truth of the Advent; they just put it into the far-off distant future. People say, “You’ve been talking about Christ’s coming a long time. It hasn’t happened yet.” That’s the attitude Jeremiah met in giving his messages. This line of thinking is itself a fulfillment of prophecy. The apostle Peter advises us, “Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.’” II Peter 3:3, 4. But when they say, “‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.” I Thessalonians 5:3.

Jesus would be pleased if we would be “wakeful” to the fulfillments of prophecy as outlined in His Word. These things ought to engage our intense interest. Today He would say to us, “Put not your trust in the tea leaves of the charlatan, or the horoscope of the prognosticator. Put your trust in the sure Word of prophecy.” When He was on earth, He expressed shock and dismay that the people of His day were skilled in weather prediction but ignorant regarding the “signs of the times.” “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

Jesus said, "But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My Master is delaying His coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the Master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of." Matthew 24:48-50. In other words, the lost, according to Jesus' sermon, are those who didn't see the vision of the almond tree. Think not that it must be decades or generations till Jesus returns. God is able to wrap things up very quickly. He has promised that He will "cut the work short in righteousness." The final movements will be rapid ones.

There is a second lesson of the almond, drawn from the story of Aaron's rod that blossomed and bore fruit. It bears upon the message God gave to Jeremiah, and especially to us. Usually it takes months for the almond to bud, blossom and bear fruit. But in the presence of God, as they placed the rods within the tabernacle, what might have otherwise taken months to do was accomplished overnight! Think about this: I believe there's a lesson for us in that miracle. A message of encouragement and promise relevant to our experience today. God says to us today, "I am ready to perform My word, in your life."

We hear sometimes that "sanctification is the work of a lifetime," and that is true. But that very phrase can be misunderstood and misconstrued so that it becomes an excuse for sinning. It can be used in a way that means, "I don't have to surrender to the Lord and overcome sin in my life today because, after all, I have an entire lifetime. I can delay putting sin out of my life. I can postpone overcoming that problem; I can put off giving up that habit." This is dangerous thinking!

We need to wake up, like the almond tree. God can bring change into our lives rapidly, overnight, if we will let Him. Aaron's rod went into the sanctuary a dry dead stick; the next day it came out a fruitful branch. God can do the same in us if we will let Him. Joseph's life changed dramatically on the road to Egypt. He went from adolescence to adulthood overnight. Paul's life changed forever that day on the Damascus Road.

Let no one say, "I can afford to coddle and cherish sin today." We are not promised tomorrow! God is able to bring forth the bud, the blossom and the fruit of righteousness immediately if we will but submit to Him. He is "ready to perform His word." Where was Aaron's rod when this miracle of sudden growth took place? It was in the tabernacle, in God's presence. If we would put ourselves in His presence by daily spending time with Him, God would work miracles of growth in us that would be amazing.

Today He is saying, "I am ready to perform My word." That word is the word of power and victory. That word created the universe. That word can recreate us into His image. The whiteness of the almond in bloom can be a promise of the purity of His merits in our lives. The fruit can be the characteristics of His grace lived out through us. That word is the word of His promise to come and redeem us.

If ever the phrase “A picture is worth a thousand words” was true, it surely applied to a clip I saw a few days ago. The media had been hoping for news relating to Captain Richard Phillips, who had been hijacked by Somali pirates and held captive. Suddenly the news camera caught a vehicle pulling into the driveway of the Phillips’ home in Winchester, Massachusetts and out sprung jubilant passengers who shot into the house without a word. Words really weren’t needed. One look on their faces told more than volumes. It was good news. No, it was great news! Richard was safe, and soon to be reunited with his family. A daring rescue had been successfully completed.

Jesus is coming to save us and take us home. If we could only see how soon God’s daring rescue plan will be completed! If we could only know the lesson of the almond tree! If we could only realize that He is ready to perform His word! What do you see, Jeremiah?