

Think You've Seen Nothing Like This? Talk to Jeremiah

It had been a while since I stopped by Jeremiah's place to get his take on our current situation.

In our [last conversation](#), a year and a half ago, he identified some features of pre-exilic Judah that had an eerie similarity to what we were experiencing at the time.

I was anxious for an update, now that the picture was unfolding further. He wasn't too specific then about what he saw as outcomes, and I needed his wisdom regarding where things seemed to be going now.

He seemed glad, and not very surprised, to see me.

"I figured you'd be coming by soon," he said as he greeted me at the door. "I've been watching the news, and I knew it wouldn't be long. History produces a lot of reruns, and I'm becoming less surprised that folks continue to get themselves in the same fix over and over again."

"I really need your help with the conflict that seems to be everywhere among people I know and care about," I said. "Things seem to be coming apart from the inside. There are threats of hostility from the outside, and people's commitments are lined up against each other like football rivalries. I've never seen anything like this."

"Well," he said, "you just don't have a very long view on how things have been. Not long before 587 BCE, things in Judah were coming to a head beyond what we talked about last time."

"The Babylonians were on the horizon, eager to flex their muscles and hungry to expand their kingdom into our area, the people had rocked along with their comfortable religious slogans and ceremonies (Jeremiah 7:1-29), without growing in their understanding of the covenant," Jeremiah explained. "The political and religious leaders were doing a pretty good job of trying to protect their power and privilege in the face of all that" (Jeremiah 23:9-22).

"I and a few others had been trying to get our people to see that the dangers were

real and getting more threatening,” he said, “but they didn’t seem to want to hear that, preferring instead to trust in the security of the city and the Temple, and embracing a vision of the ‘good old days’ that the leaders were good at holding up for them to see” (Jeremiah 6:13-15).

“Wow,” I said. “That sounds familiar. We know how your story turned out. The city and the Temple didn’t survive, and the covenant community found itself in exile without much of what had supported their faith in the past. Is that where we are heading?”

“I’m not sure,” Jeremiah replied. “A lot depends on how the challenge is responded to. The religious leaders that were aligned with the king (Jeremiah 28:1-17) persisted in encouraging a denial of the deeper problem of idolatry and injustice that had become the accepted way of life.”

“The people were so frightened by uncertainty that they continued to seek security in the Temple and other relics of their promise of specialness,” he said. “They failed to see that they were actually in ‘faith-exile’ even before the Babylonians came. Looking back on it, they were probably too far down the slippery slope to catch themselves.”

Jeremiah continued, “I heard one of your preachers use a line that I liked and was similar to the conviction I came to watching Judah’s decline: ‘Sometimes you have to lose what you can’t keep to discover what you can’t lose.’”

“Our covenant faith had gotten so wrapped up in religious trappings that it was hard to see its heart anymore,” he told me. “It took the loss of just about everything that had come to represent that faith, symbolized by city and Temple, to bring us to a place where we could hear of the Lord’s faithfulness and willingness to bring renewal to our community” (Jeremiah 31:27-34).

“Now, to your real question: ‘Will this happen to us?’ Here’s what I think,” Jeremiah said. “There may be enough integrity left in your structures and systems to avoid the catastrophic outcome that we experienced; but even then, there will be some losses that won’t be easy to bear.”

“You may have to lose some of the assumptions of specialness that you as a nation have, and particularly that certain parts of your population have,” he continued. “These are the basis for much of the injustice and idolatry that has found its way

into your collective life. And, you will probably have to lose your dependence on some of the beliefs and ideas that have undergirded your religious and political security.”

“Through the ages, societies have sought greatness while forgetting what it means to be good, forgetting that real greatness comes as a byproduct of a commitment to goodness,” Jeremiah said. “You have a lot of voices that are calling attention to this, and your hope lies in your willingness to hear and heed them. Go and be one of those voices.”

“You seem to know us pretty well,” I said as I prepared to leave. “A good reality check is always a mixture of honest, even uncomfortable, assessment and a hopefulness that sees beyond the present. I hope the invitation is open to come back as I continue to need help with this.”

“Always,” he said.

[Colin Harris](#) is professor emeritus of religious studies at Mercer University and a member of Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia.