



STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Jeremiah and Ezekiel



60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: Only Radical Surgery Can Save This Patient

*“I will slay in my anger and wrath...
I will bring health and healing.”*

(Jeremiah 33:5–6)

A few years ago, an Australian woman stabbed me. She had planned her move so carefully that I was powerless to stop her. First, she arranged for her friend to drug me so that I became disorientated. Then she stabbed me with a sharp knife, slicing a great chunk of flesh out of my leg. Her blade was only inches away from a major artery.

Sounds pretty shocking, I know. But what if I told you that I had been diagnosed with a suspected melanoma? What if I told you that the Australian woman was a gifted surgeon who had been tasked with removing the suspicious tissue from my body? What if I told you that her scalpel enabled me to sit here writing this devotional commentary for you, cancer-free? It would transform your perspective, and I want you to think the same way about Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They are two of the greatest writers of the Old Testament, and two of the most neglected. They share a common message. They both address the same spiritual cancer that is spreading across the southern kingdom of Judah, and they both reveal God’s diagnosis: *Only radical surgery can save this patient.*¹

¹ The twelve tribes of Israel had split into two kingdoms in 930 BC. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been destroyed by this spiritual cancer in 722 BC. Jeremiah and Ezekiel address the southern kingdom of Judah in order to rescue it from the fate of its northern neighbour.



Jeremiah 1–25 explains why **radical surgery is needed**.

These early chapters are the reason why, in modern English, we still refer to any speech that outlines a long list of problems as a jeremiad. They are why modern politicians dismiss those who point out problems with their policies as the Jeremys of this world. Granted, these chapters can make for difficult reading in places, but that's precisely the point. Nobody likes to be sat down by their doctor and informed that they have cancer, but it would be far worse for their doctor to pretend that everything was looking fine and rosy when it wasn't. Jeremiah describes the sin that is destroying God's people and he calls his listeners to lie down gladly on God's operating table before it spreads to their entire body. At a time when many churches are in decline and when our experience of Christianity seems quite distant from the triumphs of the book of Acts, we need to read these chapters carefully. They help us to recognize the spiritual cancer that still destroys God's people. They invite us to embrace God's scalpel in our own lives and in our own churches today.

Jeremiah 26–52 informs us that **radical surgery has begun**. The Lord has heard his people's response to his diagnosis, and he has begun his life-saving operation. These chapters are full of horror, as many people close their ears to the doctor's warnings and become part of the infected tissue that needs to be removed from the body. But these chapters are also full of glorious hope, as others face up to the dire diagnosis and find deliverance. The Lord uses these chapters to describe the bright future which lies on the other side of surgery for anybody who is willing to surrender to the truth of his Word.

Lamentations is a collection of poems that teach us healthy ways of **responding to surgery**. Although the five poems are anonymous, we will discover later that the prophet Jeremiah probably penned them and so we will take a brief look at them in our tour through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He teaches us how to weep for the sin inside our churches and for the catastrophic pain that it inevitably causes. He encourages us that the Lord wounds us in order to heal us, so long as we respond well to his scalpel.





Ezekiel 1–32 informs us sadly that **further surgery is needed**. Ezekiel was a teenager in 605 BC, when the Babylonians first besieged Jerusalem and carried away thousands of captives, including Daniel and his friends. Ezekiel therefore witnessed first-hand the stubborn refusal of the Jewish leaders to surrender to the surgeon's hand of God. He was in his twenties when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem for a second time, in 597 BC, and he found himself among the group of captives taken into exile. These chapters record his prophecies in Babylonia during the eleven years that led up to the total destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Ezekiel confronts the spiritual cancer that still lingers on in Judah and in its capital city of Jerusalem, pleading with God's people to surrender to the surgeon's blade while they still have a chance. Otherwise their nation will need to be ruined so that its spiritual recovery can begin.

Ezekiel 33–48 is a glorious proclamation of **the results of surgery**. After Jerusalem is destroyed and Judah is swallowed up into the Babylonian Empire, the Jewish exiles start hearing promises of a glorious future for their fallen nation. Even now, Ezekiel prophesies that if they repent of their rebellion against the Lord, he will bring them back to their land and recommence their nation's great salvation story. These chapters take us back to the creation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, encouraging the Jewish survivors to believe that the Lord's surgery has been successful and that the best days for God's people now lie ahead of them. These chapters are full of mighty promises about what God has in store for those who willingly embrace his radical surgery.

So, well done for deciding to read these books of the Bible and thank you for allowing me to guide you through them in this devotional commentary. Jeremiah, Lamentations and Ezekiel are some of the least-read books of the Bible, but they are also some of the most rewarding. They are still the words God speaks to his backslidden people today.

It doesn't take much insight to spot that the church in the West has problems very similar to those of Jerusalem and Judah,





as described by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Some time ago, a headline in *The Independent* newspaper predicted that the church would be dead within 40 years.² A few years later, an Anglican bishop admitted to *The Daily Telegraph* that he felt it hard to see the church surviving more than another 30 years.³

So let's not treat these three books as somebody else's mail, dismissing them as too gloomy or too difficult for us to understand. These three books of the Old Testament are still God's Word to his people today. Full of solemn warnings and glorious promises, they still warn believers in our own generation that only radical surgery can save this patient.

² *The Independent* is published in London, UK, and ran this headline on 16 April 2000.

³ *The Daily Telegraph* is also based in London and ran this article on 27 June 2009.





Jeremiah 1–25:

Radical Surgery is Needed



You Go First (Jeremiah 1:1–19)

“Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them.”

(Jeremiah 1:17)

RADICAL SURGERY IS NEEDED

One of the best lines in the movie *Shrek* comes when the evil Lord Farquaad sends his soldiers off on a near-impossible mission. He informs them grandly but callously that some of them may have to die – but that it’s a sacrifice that he is willing to make!¹

The opening verses of the book of Jeremiah reassure us that the prophet is nothing like Lord Farquaad. He does not merely inform other people that *radical surgery is needed*. He is the very first to lie down gladly on the Lord’s operating table.

Jeremiah is introduced to us as “*one of the priests at Anathoth*”, a town three miles to the northeast of Jerusalem that was synonymous with sin and corruption. Not only was the town named after the Canaanite war goddess Anath, but it was also home to a family of priests that had been spiritually sidelined for the sins of its ancestors. The family had been cursed because Eli tolerated wickedness within among his sons, and the family had been exiled to Anathoth as a result of Abiathar’s treachery towards King Solomon.² Jeremiah had therefore grown up in a family that tried to keep its nose clean in the hope of being reprieved, so when the Lord called him to pronounce a dire

¹ *Shrek* (DreamWorks Pictures, 2001).

² Joshua 21:17–18, 1 Samuel 2:27–36 and 1 Kings 2:26–27.



diagnosis over the disobedient nation of Judah, he was asking him to surrender all hope of ever being restored to the ranks of the respectable.³ Preaching such a message would make the prophet so unpopular that even the disgraced priests of Anathoth would seek to murder him in 11:21–23. Nobody likes to be given bad news, so the Lord warns Jeremiah upfront that serving as his prophet will cost him everything. In order to preach that only radical surgery can save the nation of Judah, Jeremiah must be the first to submit to God's surgeon's scalpel.

These opening verses inform us that Jeremiah preached his unpopular message for over forty years. He started in 627 BC, in the thirteenth year of King Josiah. He carried on throughout the reigns of the last four kings of Judah, then continued to prophesy even after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.⁴ Jeremiah expresses his frustration over this in 25:3, while still only halfway through his marathon of ministry. He would suffer *physically* when the kings of Judah tortured him and threw him into prison. He would suffer *emotionally* when the Lord forbade him from marrying, even though all the other priests in his family had married.⁵ He would suffer *spiritually* when his insights made him weep for his unrepentant nation. Unlike Lord Farquaad, Jeremiah completely practises what he preaches. Not for nothing is he known as *The Weeping Prophet*. The Lord calls Jeremiah to embrace this cost and to lead the way in surrendering to his surgeon's scalpel. He encourages him

³ Jeremiah's father was named Hilkiah, which means *The Lord Is My Portion* and which was also the name of the high priest in Jerusalem (2 Kings 22:8). Although their cursed family had been barred from the Temple, the priests of Anathoth still longed to rejoin the other priestly families in Jerusalem.

⁴ Josiah reigned 640–609 BC, Jehoahaz reigned 609 BC, Jehoiakim reigned 609–598 BC, Jehoiachin reigned 598–597 BC and Zedekiah reigned 597–586 BC. We do not know how Jeremiah died, but Jewish tradition says that he was stoned to death by some of the Jewish survivors in Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem.

⁵ Jeremiah's call to singleness would be a prophetic sign to his hearers (16:1–4), as was Hosea's call to marry a prostitute and Ezekiel's call not to grieve after his wife died (Hosea 1:2 and Ezekiel 24:15–24).



that his life is brimfull of destiny. Before he was conceived in his mother's womb, the Lord had already chosen him to serve as his prophet to the nations (verse 5).⁶ This is very good news. It reminds us that our salvation and significance derive from God's unsolicited grace towards us and not from our own attempts to win his favour.⁷ But it didn't sound like good news to Jeremiah at the time.⁸ He tries to postpone his operation to another day, protesting (verse 6), *"Alas, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am too young."*⁹ The Lord responds by pledging to stand alongside him at all times to protect him and to give him wisdom beyond his years. The Lord fortifies Jeremiah still further by doing something that he knows will remind him of the commissioning of the prophet Isaiah. One of the interesting features of the book of Jeremiah is how often it echoes the other Old Testament prophets. He is even saved from death row in 26:17–19 when some of Judah's leaders notice how similar his words sound to those of the prophet Micah. When the Lord touches Jeremiah's mouth, it is therefore a deliberate echo of the way in which he commissioned the prince of prophets back in Isaiah 6:6–7. Whenever Jeremiah feels lonely and isolated, this action will remind him that he is merely the latest soldier in a great prophetic army.

The Lord offers Jeremiah a third encouragement through some clever wordplay. If the second syllable of the name Jeremiah comes from the Hebrew verb *rūm*, then his name

⁶ Jeremiah is not just called to prophesy to the nation of Judah, but also to the Gentile nations. He does this in chapters 46–51, and also in his proclamation of God's new and better covenant for everyone who believes.

⁷ The Apostle Paul echoes this in Romans 9:10–16 and Ephesians 2:8–10.

⁸ *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you"* is still greeted by many as bad news today, since it answers the question of when human life begins. It stands alongside Psalm 22:10, Luke 1:41–44 and Galatians 1:15 in declaring that life begins at conception and that to terminate a pregnancy is therefore to take a life.

⁹ This is a poor excuse, since the priests of Anathoth had all been cursed with never living to old age (1 Samuel 2:32). Jeremiah was already in his teens or twenties, so the sooner he started, the better!



means *The Lord Lifts Up* or *The Lord Raises Up*, but if it comes from the Hebrew verb *rāmāh* then his name means *The Lord Throws Down* or *The Lord Razes to The Ground*. God uses this ambiguity to encourage Jeremiah in verse 10 that both are true. His words will tear down the wicked in their arrogance and they will build up the humble in their salvation. He will preach the gospel that is later likened to a double-edged sword.¹⁰

The Lord encourages Jeremiah further by giving him some quick visions to kickstart his prophetic ministry. The Hebrew words for *almond tree* and for *watching* are *shāqēd* and *shōqēd*, so Jeremiah's first picture is a simple promise that the Lord is watching to ensure that everything that Jeremiah speaks will be fulfilled. The vision of a pot of boiling water poured out from the north against Jerusalem is a first hint at which nation the Lord will use as his surgeon's scalpel to operate on his people.¹¹

The Lord therefore ends this commissioning chapter by calling Jeremiah to go first. *"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them."*¹² *Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land ... They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you."*

The people of Judah may not like Jeremiah's prophecies but, when they watch him gladly go first onto the Lord's operating table, some of them will start to believe his message that only radical surgery can save their nation.

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:12. Four out of the six things that God speaks over Jeremiah in 1:10 are about tearing down. Only two are about building up. If we want to preach for salvation, we need to preach against sin.

¹¹ Jeremiah started prophesying in 627 BC, around the same year that Babylon threw off Assyrian rule in the north and began amassing its own empire. Still, God insists in 1:10 that Jeremiah is the real nation-changer.

¹² The great antidote to the fear of people is to fear the Lord instead. The Lord essentially warns Jeremiah: *Do not be afraid of these people, or I will give you good reason to be afraid in front of them!*



Head Down (Jeremiah 2:1–3:5)

“They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.”

(Jeremiah 2:5)

RADICAL SURGERY IS NEEDED

An old Persian proverb warns us that *“A fish rots from the head down.”*¹ Whenever a nation or an organization goes bad, the problem can always be traced back to the top. In this first prophecy in his collection, the prophet Jeremiah agrees. He traces the heart of Judah’s problem right back to the heart of Judah’s problematic leaders.

The twelve tribes of Israel were always meant to look to the Lord as their true leader. In 2:1–3, the Lord reminisces fondly about the early days after the Exodus when that was briefly true. The Israelites looked to him as their Deliverer and they loved him with all of the excited affection of a newlywed bride. In 2:4–6, the Lord recalls that this honeymoon period did not last very long. The Israelites quickly began grumbling that they were thirsty in the desert. Instead of looking to the Lord to help them, they built a golden calf and looked to pagan deities instead. One of the big themes of the Bible is that we become like what we worship. To choose our god is to choose our destiny, because a fish rots from the head down. *“They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.”*²

¹ The thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi first shared this proverb in his poem *Masnavi* (3.144).

² The Bible states this principle both negatively and positively. As we look to idols, we become corrupted (2 Kings 17:15 and Romans 1:18–32). As we look to Jesus, we become glorious (2 Corinthians 3:16–18).



In 2:7-8, the Lord recalls how he called their bluff. The Israelites had blamed him for their many hardships in the desert, so he transformed their poverty into prosperity. He empowered them to dispossess the Canaanites and to gain possession of some of the most fertile farmlands in the region. He gave them the Law as a written record of his character and of his constant mercies towards their sinful nation. He gave them priests to preach the Law to them and prophets to speak fresh words from the throne of heaven. He gave them leaders to rule as regents for the Lord as King. Since the Israelites had disobeyed him in their poverty, this was a test of whether they would serve him gladly in times of prosperity. It was a test that Israel failed. They became even more rebellious in the good times than in the bad. Their priests stopped preaching about him, and their prophets started claiming that the Canaanite rain god Baal was the true architect of their prosperity.³ Their leaders turned their backs on God, and the rest of Israel followed. A fish rots from the head down. Evil gods produced evil leaders and an evil nation.

In 2:9-13, the Lord adopts the tone of a prosecuting lawyer and calls the skies to bear witness that no other nation has betrayed its national gods as Israel has betrayed him. The skies can testify that nowhere – from the marauding seafarers of Cyprus in the far west to the nomadic Arabs of Kedar in the far east – has any other nation ever done such a vile thing. In verse 13, the Lord therefore repeats the double-accusation that he made against the nation of Judah in 1:16. *“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”* This is one of the most famous verses in the book of Jeremiah, comparing the Lord to a spring that endlessly gushes forth the water of life, and the pagan idols to

³ The Hebrew word for *fertile land* in 2:7 is *carmel*, which was meant to remind the people of Judah that Baal had been unmasked as a deceiving demon by the prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18.



empty wells that demand heavy lifting but that prove powerless to deliver on their promises.⁴

In 2:14–19, the Lord alerts the people of Judah to the work of his surgeon’s scalpel. The ten northern tribes of Israel have already paid the price for their refusal to allow God to operate on their sin. In 722 BC, the Assyrians destroyed their cities and turned their fertile fields into a wasteland, carrying the few survivors into exile as their plunder. In 609 BC, the Egyptians killed King Josiah in battle and, three months later deposed Jehoahaz as his successor to install Jehoiakim as their puppet ruler instead.⁵ Even a fool could see that this was a direct result of Judah having chosen to worship Assyrian and Egyptian idols instead of the God of Israel. It was God’s surgeon’s scalpel operating on their sin. *“Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you.”*

In 2:20–30, the Lord confronts the nation that he rescued from slavery in Egypt for being so foolish as to go back to its former slave masters in search of freedom. It is all about leadership, because a fish rots from the head down. It is the *kings*, the *officials*, the *priests* and the *prophets* who have led the southern tribes astray into worshipping the gods of wood and stone that proved so fatal to the northern tribes.⁶ It is Judah’s leaders who have turned the devoted bride of 2:2 into the adulterous prostitute of 2:20.⁷ It is Judah’s leaders who have trained God’s people to lust after foreign idols like a camel

⁴ See also Jeremiah 17:5–8 and 17:13, Ezekiel 47:1–12, and John 4:10–15 and 7:37–39.

⁵ 2 Chronicles 35:20–36:4. *Memphis* was the capital city of Egypt, and *Tahpanhes* another of its major cities. Though undated, these verses show us that Jeremiah must have prophesied these words in 609 or 608 BC.

⁶ The leaders of Judah murdered the true prophets of the Lord (2:30). Instead of using their leadership positions to teach the people how to serve God, they became servants of the roaring lion, Satan (1 Peter 5:8).

⁷ *High hills* and *leafy trees* were the choice sites for pagan altars (1 Kings 14:23, 2 Kings 17:10 and Ezekiel 6:13).



or a donkey in mating season.⁸ Yet now, those same leaders dare to blame the Lord for their defeat at the hands of the Egyptian army. Let their idols deliver them!⁹ Better still, let them turn back to the Lord and plead with him to cut away the fatal cancer of their sin.¹⁰

In 2:31-3:5, the Lord uses the nation of Judah's own laws to condemn them. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 forbade a Jewish man from divorcing his wife in order to have sex with another woman, only to take her back without having technically committed adultery. If their own law courts outlawed such moral trickery, then how can the leaders of leaders imagine that they can cast the Lord aside to worship foreign idols and oppress the poor, before insisting in his Temple courtyards that "*I am innocent*" and "*I have not sinned*"?¹¹ How dare they still address the Lord as their "*Father*" and "*Friend*"? He has sent a drought upon their land to show them that he has witnessed their Baal-worship and made plans to judge them as he judged the wicked King Ahab of Israel.

This prophecy is the first in Jeremiah's collection because it goes straight to the heart of Judah's problems. A fish rots from the head down. The leaders of Judah have led their nation astray and they must lead it back to the Lord in repentance. They must lead the way in surrendering to God's surgeon's scalpel, because radical surgery is required.

⁸ The *valley* in 2:23 is the Valley of Ben Hinnom, the site of a shrine where the people of Judah murdered their children as sacrifices to the false god Molek. King Josiah had destroyed the shrine, but it appears that it was quickly rebuilt by his successors (2 Chronicles 28:3 and 33:6, and 2 Kings 23:10).

⁹ The Lord still says the same thing to backslidden churches today: Let your clever modifications to my gospel stem your decline! You rejected my Word long ago, so I will do nothing to keep your religious social club open!

¹⁰ Jeremiah 2:22 echoes Isaiah 1:18. There is no detergent (Hebrew *bōrith*) that can cleanse those who break God's covenant (Hebrew *berith*). The only detergent strong enough to cleanse away sin is the blood of Jesus.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 4:4 warns that we can fall for this too. Believing we are innocent does not make us innocent.