



BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



Summary

This is the story of a prophet who was God's lone faithful voice in a time of crisis for Judah. Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet because his emotional expressions reflected God's profound regret at what had gone wrong with his people, and Jeremiah was entrusted and empowered to deliver bad news to them about the fate of their nation. His message would not be popular or well received.

However, God also gave people hope, opportunities to change and good news that even though exile from the promised land was imminent, restoration would eventually follow. Not only that, but Jeremiah was given glimpses of the salvation God would offer to bring all nations back to himself.

Bern Leckie

Monday June 22: Jeremiah 1-3

What makes you successful?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Jeremiah was, by almost any standard, a failure. This lengthy account of his life's ministry is hard to take in – it's emotionally swampy, relentlessly down, salt tears dripping into wounds caused by people's rebellion against God. It went down as well as you might expect.

Jeremiah was not the only prophet in the land, but he was the one no-one wanted to listen to. People didn't respond to his criticisms, warnings, pictures or pleas with acceptance of their need to change. Would you book him for your conference? Not if you wanted people to come. What's the point of having a speaker no-one will like, accept or listen to?

The incredible thing is that Jeremiah lived this unpopular life in faithfulness to God who called him. Over Jeremiah's objections, I love that God filled him with the assurance that he was special, called, known from before birth, set apart and destined for a life God would equip him for. I love that Jeremiah really could see and hear God at work in a difficult time and cope, not just with people's opposition but with the ferocity of God's stormy passion.

We'll see over time that God had many reasons to feel strongly about the state of his people. While it might sometimes look like a moan about religious stuff, I love that it's much more an expression of pain about relationships. God's people had become unfaithful and this would cause far worse problems than patchy attendance at the temple.

While Jeremiah's failure to turn this around was lamentable, his one success was the only thing which mattered – he was faithful to God while others were not. This meant that God could be known, even though people did not want to know at the time.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is passionate about people and the quality of relationship they have with him. While we have been looking at God's dealings with rulers recently, it's clear from this that God does not just look at what leaders are doing, but is concerned for everyone, including people who have stopped looking for him. To reach those people, God can empower those who trust him to speak and reach out in his name. His measure of success is faithfulness.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This challenges my ideas of how I know things are going well. I find it easy to judge life in terms of good feelings, comfort and popular success. I must remember that faithfulness to God matters more than any of that. So, I need to spend more time listening to God, not just asking him to bless my plans, and when he calls or corrects me, I need to respond.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I pray and seek God with, including our online small group.

Tuesday June 23: Jeremiah 4-6

This is everyone's problem

What did I like about today's reading?

This is hard to like. In recent readings we have heard a lot about how a few rotten rulers led Israel and Judah the wrong way. But here, it's impossible to escape God's judgement on everybody. "If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth," said God, "I will forgive this city."

This also shows me the root of God's concern expressed as faithfulness to him. It was not about religion. Lack of relationship with God led to social injustice because people followed selfishness and foolishness instead of love and wisdom.

There is harsh criticism of every kind of people from the poor to the leaders, including the prophets and priests. Somehow, their faithful relationships with God had been replaced by doing things their own way, failing to recognise their society's problems and saying "Peace, peace," as if all was fine. Bad news – it was not. And without the help of the people in roles God had established to lead others to him, God would grab the nation's attention with something terrible.

What can there be to like about "disaster from the north" or "a lion... a destroyer of nations"? It's only from a safe distance that we can feel any comfort about God at work like this. But imagine being there at the time. Would you heed one man's warnings and change, or prefer to believe the mainstream message of peace and reassurance that you're fine?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is serious about people getting to know him for real and being able to live good lives, full of his love as a result. He knows that we can easily mistake comfort for goodness – we can feel fine about ourselves even while causing pain to others, as long as we cut ourselves off from warnings. But God will not allow this to continue.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This makes me wonder about where I prefer comfort to reality. Of course, I like to think of myself as good and right, as well as saved and justified in Christ. But can I honestly say there's nothing I need to do better in the way I treat neighbours and people from different cultures?

Conversations around how "Black Lives Matter" have been sobering and useful. I want to be better at seeing people the way God does, not through my own limiting experience and stereotypes. To do that, I need to renew faithful commitment to God.

Who am I going to share this with?

People in our multi-cultural school community where the pressures of lockdown, isolation and illness have affected some very differently from us. How does God want us to help?

Thursday June 25: Jeremiah 7-10

A perfect storm of imperfections

What did I like about today's reading?

If you're finding this heavy going, I have to admit, I'm with you. I'm struggling to find things to like in the blizzards of bad, the hurricanes of hurt and the relentless showers of sh(- *that's enough* – Ed.)

It's not like there is just one thing wrong here. People were saying they were close to God, but their worship was not acceptable. God saw that when belief was put into practice, it still resulted in injustice, violence, adultery, the oppression of foreigners, widows and orphans, etc, etc, etc. Foreign gods were a problem too, but were they a root cause or a symptom?

I like the clarity God brings that any religion is worthless without obedience to God and responsiveness to correction which would bring about goodness in life, guided by God as only he can, rather than the natural results of everyone pursuing "their own course." Unfortunately, this means that corruption in passing on and interpreting God's will faithfully can have catastrophic results.

Something I find most uncomfortable is that this suggests there isn't a passive, harmless middle ground between devotion to God and rebellion against God. I think most of my friends would consider this too harsh, but from God's point of view, the people who do not acknowledge God "go from one sin to another... every one of them is a deceiver." Really? What does that mean in terms of God's judgement, then? From this, it sounds terrifying.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God has higher expectations for us than we can meet in our own strength, even with religion, law, traditions and teachings to guide us. We can only find goodness in him. Thankfully, he makes himself accessible. We have to sneak a peek ahead to find out how, but there is good news coming, fulfilled in Jesus.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Remember and be more thankful for God's grace revealed in Jesus, his life and obedience to self-sacrifice showing how faithfulness to God is possible, and his resurrection showing how God's power overcomes everything standing between us and the life God wants for us, including our worst fears about the worst that could happen if we lost the lives we have.

I am starting to feel uncomfortably like I've been too comfy with my friends not knowing Jesus. I don't feel called to be a Jeremiah to them, but I need to know how God does want to use me to do what only he can do in terms of showing the way to a different life.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I follow Jesus with, including my family and the group we chat and pray with online.

Friday June 26: Jeremiah 11-14

What kind of prophet profits?

What did I like about today's reading?

If I thought it was hard reading this, today's reading has drawn me into how hard it was for Jeremiah to speak it out. He did so faithfully, and there was a real offer of hope to God's people to change their ways and keep the land God gave them, but Jeremiah was competing with threats to his life, the physical discomforts of drought and hunger, the spiritual discomfort of wanting God to fix things more quickly, and the voices of false prophets who found a ready audience for things people wanted to hear.

What I love about God's response to Jeremiah is the enrichment of ways God used to show his heart and intentions. Beyond words, even poetry, God supplied Jeremiah with physical demonstrations of his word in action, moving beyond verbal warnings to shows of power.

This got me wondering why people continued to oppose God and threaten Jeremiah, and why false prophets were such a big thing. Were they actively plotting against God? Or did they think they were prophesying faithfully and fail because they were attaching God's name to their own feelings, opinions and desires fed by pursuits of other 'gods'?

The scripture calls their false prophecy "divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds." This sounds to me like the "rubbish in, rubbish out" principle at work - people looked for the wrong guidance in the wrong ways, and this gave them heads full of nonsense to share. If we are seeking the truth from God, we have to be a lot more careful, real, honest and vulnerable, as Jeremiah was.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God continually wants to guide his people and has an unimaginable array of ways to do this, many of which are very uncomfortable for us. However, when someone faithful is willing to be disciplined and seeks God's truth, God reveals it. Far better things come from seeking truth from God than pursuing only our own desires for everything to be OK as it is.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I love it when we receive prophetic pictures and life-affirming, even life-changing, words from God. The structure he has given us to do this faithfully involves a body of believers, not trying to do everything in our own strength. So I will get better at asking to seek prophecy together with others, and to become more ready to deal with any personal idols getting in the way of doing this faithfully, such as empty desires for recognition and acceptance.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I follow Jesus with regularly, and some people I've come to know mostly through shared desire to grow in the prophetic.

Monday June 29: Jeremiah 15-17

We need to trust God for a fruitful life

What did I like about today's reading?

To avoid confusion in the mix of messages here, it's worth remembering that we are reading a compilation of Jeremiah's words made over his lifetime, not one day's worth of revelation.

What I love as we start to see more of the big picture which developed across decades of Jeremiah's ministry is that among the doom and gloom, bright bits of hope emerge. At first they are so small we can easily miss them, but if you spotted the gems like "I will restore" (chapter 16 verse 15), don't they shine brilliantly in the dark?

It emerges that God is not simply turning off the lights in the promised land but illuminating the difference between a stubborn, self-guided life and a life of trust and confidence in God.

I was really thirsty for the hope offered in chapter 17 by words of blessing for people who choose trust in the Lord, being "like a tree planted by the water... it does not fear when heat comes... and never fails to bear fruit." That sounds like the sort of life I want! Let me cut this out and put it on the fridge right away!

Or maybe I need to keep it in the context it was given. It feels like more than a simple reassurance – after all, the false prophets were busy telling people everything would be fine, and they were condemned for missing the point. There was a night coming before the dawn. Before restoration, people would live in exile. In difficulty, perhaps people would become more conscious of their choice between trusting "mere flesh" or God.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God offers life and sustained goodness for people who trust him, and the difference between this and the life of not relying on God can be evident by our fruitfulness – not the quantity of our achievements, but the quality of our lives and love for others. This picture extends into the New Testament too, with Jesus' story of the vine we need to be part of (John 15), as well as Paul's picture of the fruit of the Spirit God grows in us (Ephesians 5).

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I have noticed that the pressure and, in some ways, darkness of our current time of physical exile from our old routines and each other has helped reveal what I really hope for. On difficult days, I realise how much I rely on God as the source of love, joy and peace that I need for me and my family. I miss shopping and fast food! But it turns out they aren't the biggest desires of my heart. Will they take up much more space in my life when they are more easily available? I want to grow like the tree whose roots extend into the stream, more firmly planted in the sustainable life which comes from reliance on God.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family.

Tuesday June 30: Jeremiah 18-21

The things we think are solid

What did I like about today's reading?

It's amazing how shocking or painful it can be when something solid gets broken. I still remember breaking my leg years ago, and it will be even longer before our city (and the world) will forget the day Colston's statue came down. Many are still upset about how this happened and what it means – have we tried to erase history? Or have we added significantly to our story by reshaping some of our landscape, even something solid?

And if people can make a statement by taking down statues, how much more can God make a statement by smashing something solid?

It's not that people never thought a clay jar could break. Those things can easily crash and crumble into heaps of splinters and tears, as so many kids and parents can testify. The surprising thing is that we see so much of ourselves and our world as unbreakable when God knows that we can be as fragile as clay.

I love that Jeremiah's picture is not just about things breaking, though. The shocking picture of "disaster... that will make the ears of everyone who hears it tingle" is preceded by a different story, given to Jeremiah privately, about clay and its flexibility.

God shows Jeremiah that he can work Israel "like clay in the hands of the potter." This clay is soft, it can be shaped and reshaped, and the form it takes is the one which seems best to its maker. God used this to show Jeremiah that solid looking things could change, including his mind, the will of the maker. So a soft-hearted nation, one whose people could repent and desire change, could have its destiny reshaped by God.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God promises to deal with evil, and that has consequences for everyone opposed to him. But he is able, perhaps surprisingly so, to reshape and recreate where we are willing to be defined by his hands. It may help us to remember that we are all in his hands whether we believe and trust God or not. Perhaps God wants us to know that we are fragile and not as solid in our own strength as we think, but that we will always be products of his work.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Remember how temporary many of the solid looking things in my life have been, from things I thought I would always do for work, to the big chunk of ceiling which fell down in our house last week! However, I want the work and relationships formed through God's love, grown by him in me, to define me forever. There is still some growing to do.

Who am I going to share this with?

This is a bit of a deep one, so I'll have to think and pray more about it. Ultimately, I'm wanting to acknowledge better that I want my life to be a product of what God does in me, so it makes sense to listen to what he says about sharing this!

Thursday July 2: Jeremiah 22-25

What does it mean to know God? (You won't believe God's answer!)

What did I like about today's reading?

While this book can be dark and confusing at times, I appreciate the special clarity in this passage about why God was angry with his people and what he was going to do about it. Breaking a covenant with God and failing to obey his laws might sound trivial or irrelevant to some people, perhaps to friends of different or no faith, and worshiping other gods might sound fine to people who worship other gods. Yet God said that people from many nations would remark upon Jerusalem's fall and recognise his involvement.

The thing is, God was not complaining about Judah's religion as much as its justice. This comes up so many times in Jeremiah's prophecies, but just in case we've missed it, the commands God insisted his people obey were to "do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow."

I love how God spelled out what makes a good king – not having more stuff, but being "right and just" and defending "the cause of the poor and needy... Is that not what it means to know me?"

Other nations expected to have different gods but could recognise when people were being treated well or not. God wanted to equip and train his people to be the best at this.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Worship of God goes completely together with good use of God's resources, including our time, money and ability to choose how to use them. While only one nation might have been brought up to know the intricacies of God's law, many nations would recognise the injustice, selfishness and folly which was getting Judah into trouble.

Thankfully God had a solution in mind which would be just as widely recognised - a "righteous Branch" for David, God's promised salvation through his family line, "a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land." We recognise this as Jesus.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I want to remember that it is God's goodness, recognisable through Jesus, which is most attractive to friends who don't yet believe in God, and that God can grab their attention without me necessarily having to think of ways to make church sound appealing to them. I want to rely on God more and let him use me on his mission so that more can know him.

Who am I going to share this with?

There are conversations I need to keep coming back to around our school community where faith and practical service overlap. We don't just want to work in our own strength here!

Friday July 3: Jeremiah 26-29

“I know the plans I have for you”

What did I like about today's reading?

I love where this passage goes, towards a well-known, much quoted reassurance about God's plans for us. But I think there's a lesson from its context. We don't always understand God, hear him or each other correctly. I love that we can learn how to do this, though.

People's reaction to Jeremiah's prophecy in chapter 26 is a good example. He tells them what they must do to avoid discipline from God, but their hearing is selective – all they take in is the damnation, “this city will be desolate,” not that they can do something to avoid it. Just as they were about to sentence Jeremiah to death, who stepped in? Some elders had been paying attention, remembered and learned from history, so they could recognise the importance of repentance in the days of Hezekiah. That's what Jeremiah is talking about! We know it because we have seen it. Others hadn't seen repentance in action and Jeremiah's words about it didn't even register with them.

Maybe that was the problem for Hananiah and the other false prophets too. They had never seen and couldn't imagine the fall of their nation. It has to carry on! Babylon has to be broken! It didn't make sense to them that God would lead people into long term exile.

This is what only Jeremiah grasped: God's plans might be so different from what we expect, so seemingly opposed to things we believe are fixed and unchangeable. But what is important is that they are God's plans.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God picked Jeremiah to deliver his prophecies because Jeremiah would hear and obey God, even if what he said seemed uncomfortable, unpopular, nonsense and wrong to people.

Yet we know that God loves us. When he has a plan to prosper us, it's important that we discern this by growing closer to God and learning from what he is doing around us rather than only accepting what seems right to us based on our experience and ideas so far.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This reminds me of a number of arguments in the church where some people are sure they know God's will based on traditions, but others are pointing to things they think God is doing that might be surprising. I only want to be guided by God, and not opposition to God, in this sort of thing, but I do expect to “be transformed by the renewing of [my] mind” (Romans 12) as God's kingdom changes me as well as the world. So, I want to grow my understanding of both who God is forever and what God is doing in fresh ways today.

Who am I going to share this with?

We have some interesting things to discuss in my family about the expression of love in various ways, and how we have seen God working through them.

Monday July 6: Jeremiah 30-32

Deal with God as he deals with us

What did I like about today's reading?

Like it or not, what God is doing here is no small deal. I find it epically challenging and comforting, almost too much to take in, to be honest. If I ever go to a theme park, I prefer to avoid the big rollercoasters, but God might be putting Israel onto the biggest one ever as Jeremiah promises the massive physical challenge of exile will turn into the even bigger spiritual and emotional lows of discipline now and heights of salvation to come.

I can imagine why people preferred to listen only to the words of comfort, that nothing substantial would change. How could anyone deal with what Jeremiah was saying?

The impression I get is that God knew that people had put off dealing with him properly for far too long. It's a lot easier to be comfortable with ideas about God than to get moved by the power of his passion to change the world though, isn't it? I recognise that.

I was very tempted to concentrate only on the classic, amazing promises of chapter 31, that God "will build you up again... my people will be filled with my bounty... I will turn their mourning into gladness." But the comfort on its own doesn't make sense. God is not promising to rescue people from random misfortunes but from his own "fierce anger" which "will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart."

The point is that God has a powerful purpose to reshape and renew the world. We can hope that this coincides with stuff we want, but God calls us instead to deal with him and be shaped and changed by him too. This is not comfortable, but it's real, and it's amazing.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God points to the biggest deal of all in chapter 31 – "a new covenant" for Israel and Judah where "they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." No more barriers? No more hidden 'holy of holies'? Could everyone gain the wisdom of the teachers and the access of the priests to God directly? We recognise this being fulfilled as Jesus died, the curtain in the temple tore and, soon afterwards, the Spirit filled every believer. God means it when he says he wants us to deal with him, and he gives us access, living in us.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Spend less time this week remotely thinking about God and more time directly dealing with him in prayer, speaking and listening. I know this will take more time than I often commit. I must confess that I usually want to stay comfortable, but I know God can prefer to shake things up. I feel encouraged from the reminder that God might say to buy land, though!

Who am I going to share this with?

Other people I follow Jesus and pray with, including our online small group.

Tuesday July 7: Jeremiah 33-35

Who defines you?

What did I like about today's reading?

In the time of Jeremiah, life was clearly not going well for God's people. I expect most would have said that things were not going according to plan. But whose plan would that be?

Let's say you owned a house in Jerusalem or a field somewhere else in Judah and, according to Jeremiah, you had to leave after resisting with all your might. That wouldn't be your plan. It happens to be God's plan, and the payoff seems a long, long way away. Would you trust God to define the plan you go with instead of the one which seems best right now for you?

I love that Zedekiah rediscovered God's plan for his people to live in freedom and gave the nation a chance to recommit to it. I'm intrigued that they agreed, but then changed their minds. I guess a lot of their plans to get stuff done got disrupted by not having people to do the stuff for them. If your life got harder because of God's plan, would you prefer your own?

I don't find this an easy question. It does seem easy to look from a distance and see the foolishness of people who didn't trust God to bring ultimate joy and salvation. But at what cost? What motivation could I possibly find within myself to resist hardship now for that?

This is why I love the Rekabites. They knew who they were and whose word defined them. It wasn't just that they did what they were told. A man of God told them to drink some wine! But they refused because they were defined by their forefather and a lot of inconvenience which he told them to accept. God recognised their faithfulness and obedience with an eternal promise. It's like they and God dealt in the same currency of faithfulness and across the same scale of "much bigger than you and your lifespan." How amazing is that?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God works in the world on an enormous scale which can be difficult to grasp and accept, especially when it seems to bring a clash in our lives against what seems best for us right now. But God loves us and wants us not just to obey him but be defined by him. He wants us to know who we are in him, which is who we are in eternity, not just who we think we are right now. He offers the chance to work this out through making and keeping promises. While he knows we struggle with this, he also offers forgiveness and eternal connection to him through a promised "Righteous Saviour" we know as Jesus.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Consider what promises, especially to God, I may have made and perhaps failed to keep, put aside because of things which have seemed more pressing. I want to renew my commitment to being defined by him and living in relationship with him.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I follow Jesus with, and especially anyone I may need to fix relationship with if I have broken a promise!

Thursday July 9: Jeremiah 36-38

What makes a good leader?

What did I like about today's reading?

I am amazed by how clear the contrast is between Jeremiah, who accepted God's word and chose a life defined by passing it on faithfully, and his opponents who have so many reasons in their own minds to resist.

It's tragic because God wanted to guide people back to himself and a better life than what they had. It makes me wonder why the kings in particular, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, didn't want that.

Jehoiakim seemed unable to accept bad news or correction, even when many around him made time for Jeremiah and his words, wanting to protect him and them. This was a king of God's people who had stopped wanting to be defined by God and burned up his own legacy.

Zedekiah seems a little more nuanced. Did he want to know God's word or not? Did he want to protect Jeremiah or... what? I'm struggling to see what defines him at all. Virtually everyone who approached him wanting to do something, he let them do. Was he even a king?

Looking back at his story towards the end of 2 Kings, I remember that he was the young man placed into leadership of Judah by the king of Babylon, he "did evil in the eyes of the Lord" and, for no well explained reason, rebelled against Babylon, causing the siege of Jerusalem. At what point did Zedekiah break? Did his failed rebellion crush his spirit, or did he never have a reliable leadership bone in his body to begin with?

Either way, look at the massive difference between his weakness and the strength God gave Jeremiah to endure all of this nonsense and still proclaim God's word faithfully.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God provides leadership and can pass good leadership qualities to people who are willing to be defined by him and live faithfully. God doesn't promise comfort as a sign that this is going well, but he can use faithful people to change the world and point the way to a good life far more effectively than self-centred leaders who might be in office but not in power.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Sometimes it's fun to look at a Bible story and identify with the character in a story I'd most like to be like. For me, it's clear who I'd like to be, but it's no fun imagining sharing Jeremiah's suffering. So, I still feel the need to spend more time with God and seek clarity and strength from him. I want to point to God faithfully. Am I ready for this not to be comfy, and not to judge what is going well by how good it feels?

Who am I going to share this with?

My family and others I follow Jesus with.

Friday July 10: Jeremiah 39-42

It pays to pray

What did I like about today's reading?

There's been a lot of talking in this book so far. Lots of people with weighty words: pleas, persuasion, poetry, prophecy and power. But now, it's action time!

God's word gets seen to be true as Babylon smashes Jerusalem's defences, Zedekiah is forced to watch his sons murdered as the last thing he sees before being led off in chains and shame, and then the whole episode with Ishmael and his crazy double dealing and death pit of doom... this is NOT nice Sunday School, bedtime story material. It's horror.

Was any of it avoidable? Is there a lesson to be learned here? I'm struck by two things.

One is how God's big lesson, told through his big story, is knowable even outside of God's people themselves. I love how clearly the writer gives credit to Nebuzaradan, commander of Babylon's imperial guard, for knowing and summarising it to Jeremiah! It's not complicated – "all this happened because you people sinned against the Lord and did not obey him." Notice the "you" here – this isn't one of God's people, but he can see God at work. Ouch.

The other thing which strikes me is that if outsiders can see where God's people went wrong, how tragic it is that God's people can still make fatal mistakes by not consulting God. Gedaliah sounds like a promising leader. He's entrusted to govern, inspired many to join him and live peacefully, enjoying blessing and prosperity despite foreign rule. He even got a warning to be careful and guard his own life against a particular, named threat. He had a prophet who could reliably hear God, but chose his own counsel instead, inviting his assassins in for dinner. (It's like no-one in this story has seen Game Of Thrones!)

Good job his successors learned from this and asked Jeremiah for guidance. That all sounds like it's going to go great. I'll just come back to this on Monday and expect it to be glorious.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God guides but does not just talk. God acts and knows what people will do too. In a difficult world, it makes perfect sense to seek God's guidance. When failing to do so leads to pain, we can maybe start to appreciate God's frustration with people for not seeking him.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This makes Proverbs 3:5-6 come to mind: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." It's such a spiritual basic. Even people who don't do this, including neighbours who don't yet believe in God, know that we're supposed to do it. I need to do it more.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I pray with, to share examples of what we are seeking and finding from God, and I think there might be some not-yet-believing neighbours who want to hear about this too.

Monday July 13: Jeremiah 43-46

Can God really guide us?

What did I like about today's reading?

Last week we looked at lots of times when it was a good idea to listen to God. I love that the remnant of Judah which was allowed to stay in Jerusalem at the beginning of the exile to Babylon decided, after some hard lessons, to consult God through Jeremiah, and God responded with nice, clear instructions.

Unfortunately, their response to Jeremiah's prophecy was "You are lying!" The people were so sure of what God ought to say, they didn't believe Jeremiah. So why bother asking?

From chapter 44, I can maybe see why they wouldn't accept what Jeremiah (and God) said. People's sense of what was going well seemed to come from how much comfort and food they had and was linked to superstitions and rituals around other "gods" like "the Queen of Heaven". They associated good times and prosperity with the incense they burned and the cakes they made. It's understandable – it's a way that humans have tried to make sense of the world forever. But it's ultimately self-centred, about what we do more than any power which is genuinely bigger than us.

People who don't believe in God assume we do the same thing, and that our faith is simply a comfort and general moral guide. This story illustrates a very different point of view. If God is real and wants to change the world for the better, through us, we won't always be comfortable. If God is real and wants to renew relationship with us, we can only play our part in this by accepting his words, not blocking them out. If God is real, this story shows that the real struggle we have is not between rival religions, but within ourselves – can we accept guidance within a relationship with God, or will we go our own way instead?

I don't like that Judah's choices led to the ruin God promised. But I love that the story can be told that God does reach out for relationship with people, his voice can be heard, his power is real and that, while this can be very uncomfortable, it can also be life winning over death.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's power can be shown in history and his voice can be heard through people who are prepared to listen and pass it along faithfully. God lets people choose whether to be guided by him or not, and the guidance isn't always comfy, but we would be foolish to ignore it.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Consider this week where God may already have guided me and I might have dismissed this guidance in practice. I'll keep praying for wisdom on this!

Who am I going to share this with?

Other people I pray with.

Tuesday July 14: Jeremiah 47-49

Almighty power

What did I like about today's reading?

I often find the Bible inspirational, full of moral guidance, good advice, things in life I can relate to. This was not one of those readings. It's a great reminder that not every page, even of my "Life Application Bible", was written for my direct life application.

And why should it be? I like being reminded that this is about God's story, his power, his unsettling, world-changing work, his initiative to move heaven and earth. All for my benefit? I've probably sung something like that, but let's be real – if this is not about a 'god' of human invention but the God whose work stretches from the beginning of the universe to the end of time, I should probably settle for not feeling central to the plot at every moment.

What struck me as good to consider, though, was how this would all have felt to people who lived close to these events in the tumultuous times described. Can you imagine being at these turning points in history, where God was shaking up everything people were used to, using Israel's enemies to reboot his kingdom as well as deliver judgement on each other?

If you heard Jeremiah's words, would you turn away in disbelief like the remnant of Judah, or believe that God would re-draw the map before drawing his people back to their temple?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is more powerful than we can possibly be comfortable with. He has demonstrated his power at times when his body of people seemed weakest, most divided and closest to defeat. If this is true, then God cannot be the invention of a culture or a projection of people's ethics, hopes and dreams. Rather the world, its nations and all of us are under his power. This can seem overwhelming, but if it's how the world is, shouldn't we accept that?

An image comes to mind as I look at this passage again and see the nations like ships, the strongest that people could build, and God like the ocean and the winds. Which has more power? The things we build, or the forces we hope to understand but cannot control?

What am I going to do differently as a result?

There are many times when I reach out to God for understanding of what is going on around us. Sometimes I know God gives wisdom and I'm very glad for that, especially when it means we can make better choices and improve our lives and relationships. But I think there are also times when all we can do, at least for a while, is notice and accept that God's power is at work and that it's bigger than I can get my head around. I still feel a call to listen more and wait for God to reveal whatever he wants, and I want to grow in faith that I can trust him, even when there is big change and noise all around.

Who am I going to share this with?

I know some people who have been facing big changes in their work and family situations, and I doubt this is a good passage to comfort them(!) but we can listen to God together.

Thursday July 16: Jeremiah 50-52

How different can we imagine?

What did I like about today's reading?

As this book wraps up with a reminder of the main event, the historic fall of Jerusalem and the unspeakably shameful removal of God's people from their promised land, I'm struck by Jeremiah's incredible closing vision of a future no-one in their right mind would have predicted.

The other prophets, the false ones who were not guided by God, were either saying nothing or little would change. They found it hard to imagine God turning out his own people, and impossible to believe that an exile would be more than a short breath they could hold before going back to normal.

The remnant of Jerusalem who refused to believe God's word through Jeremiah to stay and thrive could only imagine Babylon to be what they had seen, an apparently unstoppable destructive force they must run away from.

But Jeremiah brought God's promise of a very different future, where his word and will would be final and no power, especially Babylon, would overcome it. Imagining the ruin of Babylon would be like believing the United States (or China, not picking sides) would be invaded and dissolved when, at the time of prediction, they were running the world. It's one thing to believe in God generally, but when God says unbelievable things, what can we do?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants people to know him and that his will prevails, his story continues, and his power is greater than anything we can imagine. One way he does this is through prophecy in advance of incredible turning points in life or history. This isn't the only point of prophecy – far from it, as God's people would have been much better off listening to God and obeying before things turned nasty – but when we seek him, God can show us more than we can work out for ourselves, for our comfort, strengthening and encouragement.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm struck by how hard it is, in the face of numerous global crises, to imagine a future which is extremely different from our present, even though we may want it very much. I'm already looking for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth, and wanting our "new normal" to be more socially just, sustainable and honouring to God. But I'm pretty sure that whatever I can imagine God will do to bring this about, I'm imagining too little.

I want to get past my unspoken acceptance that our future will be just a few good tweaks from our present. I want to embrace God's radical re-working of everything, including me, and get better at listening to him. Maybe if we all do, he will show us things to hope for, believe for the future and do right now which we could never have dreamt on our own.

Who am I going to share this with?

As I've shared before, I know quite a few people who want to change the world, with or without faith in God right now. I think God might want to speak into some of our conversations, so I'll look for opportunities to invite people to listen to Jesus and pray.