

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Against the Flow

(studies in Jeremiah)

A Vision for the World

(Jeremiah 46-51)

Study #10

Introduction: Big World, Big God, Big Hearts...

Have you noticed how “small” our world is becoming, how much it is shrinking?

The world today is one grand butterfly effect, where the actions of one group affect everyone and everything else.

Americans affect Nigerians and Muslims affect Sweden. Chinese factory workers affect everyone, as do North Korean dictators and South American guerillas.

Thanks to rapid transportation and instant communication, “global” concerns concern us all. The policies and the economies and the armies of the world’s nations are on our minds.

Businesses have to think globally. Grabbing market share in developing areas of the world is crucial to success these days.

The Ford Motor Company is doing well, domestically these days. But it is international sales that are driving its success. I have eaten at MacDonald’s in every country I have visited, and you probably have, too (or you could have if you had wished to). The NBA schedules games outside of the USA, understanding its need to reach the world.

In 1964, Disney came out with the “*It’s a small world, after all*” song, celebrating globalism, and acting almost as if a global mindset was something new.

But, a global perspective is nothing new. For the people of God, a concern for the world predates the Internet by several millennia.

I wonder if most people today assume that a lust for adventure, a thirst for military conquest, and a greed for glory and gold have fueled globalism. Perhaps most do think this.

But the reality is that, historically, a passion for God has been more of a factor in prompting men and women to venture beyond comfort than gold, kingdoms, and wanderlust put together.

God’s people have always had a passion for crossing borders - linguistic, racial, geographic, and cultural borders - because of their belief that no people on earth and no person on earth is irrelevant to God’s plan.

Just think... -

- In what cultural setting in America today do you find groups of folks joining together to send people and aid to such diverse places as China, India, Uruguay, Uganda, and Morocco as well as Marshall, Brandeis, O’Connor and Stevens High Schools? Only in the church.
- In what cultural setting in America today do you find a genuine interest in helping desperately needy children through such efforts as Operation Christmas Child and Project Angel Tree? Only in the church.
- In what cultural setting in America today do you find gobs and gobs of money being funneled toward the welfare of people that the givers have never even met? Only in the church.

It was the missionary, not the Internet, who gave us the global village.

And the church’s interest in helping, worldwide, springs from the heart of God. Biblical faith has always been aggressively international.

Today, as we look at Jeremiah, we see a man with a heart as big as God’s world. And Jeremiah’s interest in the world was not exceptional among the prophets.

Globalism in the prophets

Most every one of the sixteen Old Testament prophets spoke to the global situation of his day.¹

Three of the prophets were focused entirely on a nation other than Israel. (Jonah and Nahum regarding Nineveh, and Obadiah regarding Edom)

So it is not surprising that Jeremiah has words for the nations in his book, too. Sure, he had lots to say to his people, Israel. But he was not appointed as spokesman **ONLY** to his people. From the very beginning, Jeremiah was commissioned [**1:5**] *a prophet to the nations*.

And six complete chapters of his fifty two chapter long book are devoted to nations, tribes, tongues and people outside of Israel.

Orienting to Jeremiah's "Oracles to the Nations"

In chapters 46-51 Jeremiah speaks to nine² nations. The oracles are of varying lengths and it is hard to figure out why they are listed in the order in which we find them in the Bible.

The order is generally geographical, tracing a roughly west to east progression.

But the order of the oracles is not necessarily all that important! What **IS** important is the *message* of each oracle and the *fact* that the oracles are included in Scripture.³

It is important, too, to note the life that the author of these oracles lived. The man who wrote to and about the nine nations, the prophet Jeremiah, was a true home body.

¹ See Isaiah 13-23; Ezekiel 25-32; Amos 1-2 - for prophetic focus on nations.

² It is possible to count the oracles as ten, dividing the words to Kedar and Hazor. I'm treating this oracle (Jeremiah 49:28-33) as one.

³ There is even debate as to the order in which they should be recorded! Our English Bibles have them in the same order as the Hebrew Bible. In this order, the nations are listed, roughly, in a west to east order. But the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, or LXX) arranges them far differently, with the nations listed in order of political prominence. Many believe that these oracles against the nations circulated for a time as an independent work.

Knowing the World

Jeremiah, Home Body

Jeremiah was born and raised three miles northwest of Jerusalem in the small priestly village of Anathoth.

As far as we know, he never left Judah (the southern part of Palestine), except for his brief stint in Egypt, a trip taken against his will near the end of his life.

It is likely that most everyone here this morning has traveled much more widely than Jeremiah ever traveled. A world traveler he was NOT!

But one thing we discover from reading through these nine oracles is that even if Jeremiah's physical experience of the world was not broad, in his mind, in his imagination and in his spirit, he was a jet-setter!

Jeremiah, (mental) World Traveler

The geographical range of the nine oracles he gave relating to various nations takes up about 750,000 square miles. His reach and his grasp extended from as far west as Egypt to the Kingdom of Elam in the east; from Damascus in the north to Edom in the south.

And just as Jeremiah's reach and grasp were enormous, so is the extended passage for today enormous!

Because of the size of the section of the Bible we are looking at this morning, we won't be looking at each verse separately. But I do want us to see the "gist" of Jeremiah's messages. I also want us all to see that he did his homework. He knew each nation inside and out.

The first oracle was written to Egypt.

The humbling of Egypt (46:1-28)

[2] To Egypt, concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt, which was by the Euphrates River at Carchemish, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah...

By the time Jeremiah sat down to write this oracle, the people of God had had a long and difficult history with Egypt.

Abraham took trips there and so did his grandson, Jacob, along with his family. Jacob's family stayed and became enslaved for four hundred years until they were set free in the days of Moses.

There were a few alliances between the two nations, but there were way more skirmishes.

As Jeremiah wrote this oracle, Egypt was a significant player on the world stage. But she was about to engage in one of the decisive military battles of the ancient world, the Battle of Carchemish.⁴

Jeremiah saw Egypt's defeat at the hands of the Babylonians before it even happened! God drew back the curtain of history and let him see the battle unfold.⁵ As he describes the battle in this oracle, the images are vivid and precise. Reading this prophecy is like reading a ballad that captures the excitement of battle (vv. 3-6).

The city of Carchemish where the battle was waged was located north of Israel on the banks of the Euphrates River. Jeremiah mentions Ethiopia and Put, Egyptian allies, who fought and lost with Egypt against Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians at Carchemish.

Jeremiah knows all about the cities of Egypt - Migdol, Memphis, Tahpanhes - and he mentions them all. He references one of Egypt's chief gods, Amon, and the Nile River and the city of Thebes and he knowingly refers to the ruler as Pharaoh (not "king").

Having never been to Egypt, Jeremiah knows a lot about Egypt.

From Egypt, his focus shifts to Philistia.

The sword of the Lord against the Philistines (47:1-7)

[47:1] That which came as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the Philistines, before Pharaoh conquered Gaza.

From ancient times, the Israelites lived with and battled the Philistines. Jeremiah names two of the five Philistine cities here, Gaza and Ashkelon.⁶

The Philistines lived on the Mediterranean coastal plains of Palestine and Jeremiah makes reference to that coast as well as to Philistine alliances with the coastal cities, Tyre and Sidon.

After speaking to Philistia, Jeremiah turned his attention to two other nations, Moab and Ammon. First, Moab.

Tears for Moab (48:1-47)

***[48:1] Concerning Moab. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,
"Woe to Nebo, for it has been destroyed;
Kiriathaim has been put to shame, it has been captured;
The lofty stronghold has been put to shame and shattered.***

The land of Moab was located on the far side of the Dead Sea, the side to the east of Jerusalem.

Its territory consisted of high and harsh mountainous landscape, a landscape that Jeremiah could have seen from his own perch in Jerusalem. In this oracle we find reference to Moab's treacherous topography.

Jeremiah also lists place names like Luhith and Horonaim (v. 5). The god of the Moabites, Chemosh, comes in for special treatment.

And there is a long listing of Moabite cities and villages in verses 21-24 that speaks of Jeremiah's intense interest in the place.

The oracle to the related kingdom of the Ammonites follows immediately on the heels of Jeremiah's treatment of Moab.

⁴ Carchemish was located north of Israel, but midway between Egypt and Babylon, on the Euphrates, so it was a natural point for confrontation

⁵ In 612, the Assyrian capitol of Nineveh was destroyed by Babylon, leaving the powers of east (Babylon) and west (Egypt) to fight for Near Eastern supremacy.

⁶ Five major Philistine cities - Gaza, Ekron, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath.

Ammon, dispossessed (49:1-6)

**[49:1] Concerning the sons of Ammon. Thus says the Lord:
 “Does Israel have no sons?
 Or has he no heirs?
 Why then has Malcam taken possession of Gad
 And his people settled in its cities?
 [2] “Therefore behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord,
 “That I will cause a trumpet blast of war to be heard
 Against Rabbah of the sons of Ammon;
 And it will become a desolate heap,
 And her towns will be set on fire.
 Then Israel will take possession of his possessors,”
 Says the Lord.**

The Ammonites, long-time enemies of the nation of Israel, were another nation living in the hostile and desolate Dead Sea region.⁷

They helped hire the false prophet, Balaam, to curse the Jews. The judge, Jephthah, fought the Ammonites, as did King Saul and King David.

Their god was Molech - to whom they offered children as sacrifices - and Molech had been worshiped since the days of Moses (that is, for nine hundred years!).⁸

The prophecy against Ammon, as opposed to that against Moab, was brief and to the point. But both prophecies were extremely severe.

Continuing, Jeremiah next speaks to the nation of Edom.

Edom stripped bare (49:7-22)

**[7] Concerning Edom.
 Thus says the Lord of hosts,
 “Is there no longer any wisdom in Teman?**

⁷ Like Moab, the Ammonites came to be a people through very sinful means (see Genesis 19). And they had both been ages long enemies of the Jews. But there were ties of kinship with Israel, as Abraham’s nephew, Lot, was the father of both nations and Ruth (a Moabitess) was the mother of David’s ancestor.

⁸ Referred to here as “Malcam” a variant of the name Molech.

***Has good counsel been lost to the prudent?
 Has their wisdom decayed?***

Edom was the nation that came from Isaac and Rebekah’s older son, Esau. Through the centuries there had been constant battles between Israel and Edom.

The oracle tells us that Jeremiah was aware of two important truths about Edom. One, there were wise men there. Two, there were inaccessible strongholds.

The land inhabited by the Edomites was barren and rough, like the people. Attacking Edom was notoriously difficult and Jeremiah made reference to her supposed invulnerability.

Moving his focus northward, Jeremiah next references Damascus.

Damascus in panic (49:23-27)

**[23] Concerning Damascus.
 “Hamath and Arpad are put to shame,
 For they have heard bad news;
 They are disheartened.
 There is anxiety by the sea,
 It cannot be calmed.
 [24] “Damascus has become helpless;
 She has turned away to flee,
 And panic has gripped her;
 Distress and pangs have taken hold of her
 Like a woman in childbirth.**

Damascus is the only city to receive an oracle. The rest are nations. But then, Damascus was an important city.

Located north of Israel, not far from Carchemish (the site of the epic battle between Egypt and Babylon), the city had already been heavily damaged by the Assyrians a century and a half earlier, a fact which Jeremiah seems to have known. He predicts a soon to come total annihilation.

We are nearing the homestretch as we reach the land of Kedar, a nation of Bedouin tent-dwellers in the desert to the west of Babylon.

The tents of Kedar in affliction (49:28-33)

[28] Concerning Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated. Thus says the Lord, “Arise, go up to Kedar And devastate the men of the east.

In addressing Kedar, Jeremiah mentions tents and camels, and flocks. He is even aware of their distinctive hair styles (see verse 32).

Kedar was among the most powerful of the Arabian tribes in this era - and Jeremiah knew it.

The next to the last nation mentioned is also the most distant nation, geographically, from Jerusalem. Jeremiah speaks of the nation of Elam.

The bow of Elam broken (49:34-39)

[34] That which came as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet concerning Elam, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, saying:

[35] “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Behold, I am going to break the bow of Elam, The finest of their might.

[36] ‘I will bring upon Elam the four winds From the four ends of heaven, And will scatter them to all these winds; And there will be no nation To which the outcasts of Elam will not go.

Elam was an ancient kingdom at the northern end of the Persian Gulf. It was even further east than Babylon, itself far to the east of Judah.

We don’t know of any involvements between Israel and Elam during this or any other time period. We really don’t know why Jeremiah mentioned this ancient Iranian power. But he did mention it and knew that their capitol city was Susa and that it had mighty and skilled archers.

The last oracle to the nations concerns Babylon. Fully two entire chapters are given to the oracle against Babylon.

The doom of Babylon (50:1--51:64)

The empire which was soon to strike the decisive blow against Judah receives the longest oracle about her own future. And, while we won’t explore these two chapters now, Jeremiah reveals an encyclopedic knowledge of all things Babylonian.

APPLICATION POINT FOR 2009 CHRISTIANS:

In wrestling with the question, “*What do we do with these six chapters of the Bible?*”, what I’d like to do first is to simply notice something that is completely obvious.

Here it is: Jeremiah, a man who never traveled much more widely than the six mile round trip from Jerusalem to his hometown of Anathoth, was a man of the world.

It was his grasp of the particular strengths and weaknesses of the world powers of his day that allowed him to write insightful prophecies to and about these nations.

He knew their geography, history, politics, religion - and their importance. He was not “ethnocentric.”⁹ He was Jewish and no doubt glad to be so. But he gave due weight to the global community.

I believe that Jeremiah’s understanding and mental engagement with his world is a call to you and me to understand and to engage with our own.

Biblical faith is never an isolationist faith. As God’s people, we are interested in the world - its issues and its people. That interest reflects our core belief that God is the Lord of the whole earth.

I believe that Jeremiah’s oracles teach us many things. Among them, it seems to me that Christians should be as well-informed about current events and world trends as possible.

⁹ Ethnocentricity (an anthropologist’s favorite word and one that I was exposed to as a short-term missionary in 1976 when I spent a summer in Germany) - is the unthinking assumption that one’s own people are superior while other people, especially those who constitute a threat, are considered inferior. Jeremiah and all people of God completely reject ethnocentrism!

I would encourage you to get your news from a wide-ranging set of sources. Read the Wall Street Journal AND listen to National Public Radio AND watch the CBS evening news AND read World Magazine.

Learn about other political systems, far off lands, neighboring faiths, third world struggles.

Engage with the world. Know the world. Be informed. Don't let yourself become cloistered into a holy huddle. Be conversant in the great themes of our day.

Jeremiah could have never prophesied as powerfully as he did without being intensely interested in the goings on of his world. And your familiarity with the world "out there" will make you a sharper instrument in God's hands.

But, his oracles about the nations tell us something else besides his intense, God-centered interest in the God-created world in which he lived.

The oracles shout, from every line, his confidence in God's sovereign control of His world, of the nations, and of history itself.

What did Jeremiah confidently say about the future of the nations?

Knowing the One Who Made the World

Egypt?

He prophesied Egypt's destruction while Egypt was still a mighty power. The rumors spreading through Jerusalem as Jeremiah wrote were that the Egyptian army, seeking to imitate the Nile, was going to surge and overwhelm the Babylonians. It was a grand and glorious vision.

But Egypt wasn't able to pull it off. Jeremiah knew that God had decreed her downfall - and he said so.

The Philistines?

The Philistines had been a stubborn presence in Palestine from time immemorial. King David had broken much of their strength, but they remained a thorn in Israel's side into the days of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah, confident of what the Lord had revealed to him, predicted their soon and complete eradication from the stage of history.

Moab and Ammon?

Moab and Ammon were the back street thugs of the ancient world. They lived in inhospitable lands and were unassailable - until the Lord decreed their destruction. When He so decreed Jeremiah promptly and confidently proclaimed it.

Edom?

Edom, like Moab and Ammon, was a warlike, desert nation. But God decreed its fall - and I'll bet you haven't heard about any recent Edomite activities have you?

Damascus? Kedar? Elam?

Likewise for Damascus. It was a very influential city. But it would be destroyed.

The people of Kedar were elusive desert-dwellers, thought to be beyond the reach of Nebuchadnezzar. Yet God ordained that they should be brought to naught, so they were.

The warriors of Elam, expert with the bow and arrow, will find their bow broken.

And Babylon? Whew.

Babylon?

As Jeremiah writes, Babylon was the biggest, baddest nation in the world. Egypt may have been on the decline, but Babylon was becoming more powerful.

Yet Jeremiah boldly proclaimed what God told him would happen to Babylon, namely that she would be destroyed.¹⁰

¹⁰ There is no call for Jewish revolution against Babylon, only the assurance that Babylon will receive retribution for her own evil.

Writing THAT in Jeremiah's day would be like predicting that the Lakers will finish at the bottom of the Western Conference this year or that the Indianapolis Colts will lose in the first round of the playoffs.

It could never happen! But the proverb, "*It can never happen here*" is only true without its middle "n".

God told Jeremiah that Babylon would be destroyed. So, Jeremiah went out on a limb and said, calmly and confidently, "*Babylon will be destroyed!*" (really not much of a limb after God says it, huh?)¹¹

APPLICATION POINT FOR 2009 CHRISTIANS:

Jeremiah lived at a scary time in history. World powers were vying for supremacy, his own nation faced imminent destruction, and his personal security was tenuous, at best.

Yet Jeremiah spoke with utter confidence in God. He not only knew his world, he knew and trusted His God, the One who made the world.

Folks, like Jeremiah, we live in scary times.

- Military involvement is ramping up in Afghanistan and there are always other hot spots.
- The rate of job losses has slowed recently, but the unemployment rate is still 1 in 10.
- H1N1 flu abounds as do other serious diseases.
- Fragmented families, disdain for the institution of marriage, and many people do not hold to the sanctity of all human life.

BUT, there is a God who reigns sovereign over this world. He is in control.

¹¹ There is even a bit of "smack" associated with how the message was delivered. Jeremiah told Seraiah to take the message to Babylon, read it out loud and then throw it into the Euphrates River as a signal that as the scroll sank, so would Babylon sink! We don't know how any of the other messages were delivered. Did a traveling merchant get loaded down with the scroll to Damascus, Egypt or Edom?

It may be true that "*those who do not learn from history's errors are doomed to repeat them*" - but history is not cyclical. God is taking the world somewhere.

And we believe that this God/Father/Savior is taking the messes we make, that He never takes away human responsibility or freedom of choice, and that He weaves it all into a tapestry that will, in the end, be beautiful AND that will honor Him!

Because that is the God we serve we can approach the world and its scariness with the same confidence and rest Jeremiah knew as we place our trust in Him.

As we prepare to close, let's look at the oracles one more time. We've seen Jeremiah's engagement with his world and his confidence in God. This time, let's notice Jeremiah's heart for the world.

First, listen to the careful attention Jeremiah brought to his work of writing oracles to the nations.

Loving the World

Attentiveness

The messages Jeremiah prepared for the nations make up some of the most thoughtful literature found anywhere in the Bible. He took the nations and their fates seriously. He never resorted to clichés or slogans. He never referred to them dismissively or assaulted them with a stereotyped formula.

Maybe he could have lumped together all the nations and made one blast of an oracle against them. He could have just thrown something together, thinking, "*After all, they're just Ammonites/Edomites/Elamites...*"

He didn't do that. He took pains to acquire thorough and detailed knowledge about these nations and carefully crafted nine separate messages, each one uniquely addressed to the particular situation of one or the other nations.

He was as careful in putting these messages together as he was in preparing messages for his own people.

When Jeremiah wrote concerning the nations he named them specifically, described them attentively, and addressed them seriously.

We expect Jeremiah to take God seriously. We need not be surprised that he took the nations seriously, too.

Something else that must strike us as we look at these messages is the presence of mercy.

Mercy

Sure, there is a lot of judgment in these oracles.¹² But there is also **mercy** and there is **hope**. The brief lines of mercy tell us that the prophecies are not just the rantings of a vengeful prophet or of a vengeful God.

Not all of the nations received an explicit message of hope and salvation.¹³ But, then, we could find messages delivered by Jeremiah to Judah that didn't contain a hint of mercy, either!

Each of these oracles are not only predictions of destruction, they are, as God's words of judgment always are, loving calls to repentance.¹⁴

And finally, these nine oracles give us a world-sized vision of God Himself.

A God for the Whole World

Jeremiah was called to be a "*prophet to the nations*" and that call proves that God was not to be identified with a single nation or with a particular culture.¹⁵

¹² When speaking about Israel, God recounts the people's rebelliousness and declares that it is only right that He should judge a nation like this (5:9, 29; 9:9) The same thing holds true for the nations.

¹³ There is hope for Egypt at 46:26 (see also Isaiah 19:19-25 and Psalm 87:4. No word of hope for Philistia, or Edom or Damascus. Millennia of rebellion against God results in final destruction. Hope for Moab (48:47) and Ammon (49:6). Elam will receive mercy (49:39).

¹⁴ See Jonah and his message to Nineveh. His message was, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." No word of mercy. Yet when Nineveh repented, God relented.

If we understand God or Christianity as an American thing, a western thing, or "*our thing*" - we have grossly misunderstood Him and His ways.

Everybody loves being the insider. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ, properly, has no native country. It is the message of God to and for the whole world.

For that reason biblical faith always has and always will have a global dimension to it. The words that keep ringing in our ears are, "**God so loved THE WORLD...**" (John 3:16)¹⁶

APPLICATION POINT FOR 2009 CHRISTIANS:

God so loved the WORLD, indeed.

He loved the world so much that He gave Jeremiah to speak to it. Two thousand years later He gave His only Son, Jesus, to save all who trust Him.

Today, He loves the world so much that He has given a people tell the Good News that Jesus saves. You and I, together, make up that people.

And how do we go about "telling"? Watch Jeremiah.

He worked hard to craft messages that were perfectly fit for the people he was addressing. Let's remember that.

When we share the Gospel with someone, we aren't giving out a cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all formula. We are presenting the message of a Person to trust. The truths of the Gospel message never change, but the presentation must be personalized to your friend's need.

And Jeremiah spoke honestly about God's judgment AND of His mercy. He warned of judgment and he hid nothing.

¹⁵ The same God who brought Israel from Egypt, brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir (Amos 9:7).

¹⁶ See Revelation 21:24.

So when you go from this place, you are to tell others the whole Gospel. Speak about the reality of sin and judgment. Tell about Jesus' death on the cross. Tell of His glorious resurrection from the dead.

And tell everybody! Jeremiah eagerly shared God's message with Judah, Egypt, Philistia, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Elam and Babylon!

Today, the Gospel is the message everybody you know most desperately needs. Every child you know needs to hear about Jesus. Every person at work needs to know. Your teammates need Christ. Your family does, too.

There is universal need because of universal sin and there is a universal mandate to tell everybody.

We cannot grow an oak tree in a barrel. Nor can we grow a human being - really! - in a cloistered sect. The way to grow and develop as the person God saved us to become is to boldly enter the broad world in which He has placed us and live, pedal to the metal, for Him.

"God so loved the world" - that He has sent YOU to be His messenger!