

Were Jeremiah Here Now: A modern day forecaster?

Ever wonder what an Old Testament prophet like Jeremiah would be doing these days if he was living during our times? If he did, would he be feeling complacent, comfortable and spiritually at ease? Or, would he be warning us — our society — of an impending judgment and calling us to full obedience to God?

Just what were conditions like during Jeremiah's time? Are there any similarities to our day? Scripture rhymes, after all. Furthermore, God is fair and just. The standards He would use to measure His people then could hardly be different today. If they were different, it wouldn't be just. Jeremiah's warning that Judah was judged and would soon be vanquished by the Babylonians therefore serves as a useful example to us living more than 2,000 years later. We could even use the history of Judah during Jeremiah's days as a type of time piece. The more similar the conditions to our day, the more we may gain a sense of the season of our times ... the imminency of Christ's return.

Well, what *if* Jeremiah were a prophet today? It's not an unimaginable situation. After all, the world is flooded with so-called prophets these days. Jeremiah's calling would hardly be out of place. He jostled with legions of financial forecasters in his day, too. Of course, in those days different kinds of techniques were employed to forecast prosperity. Today's modern forecasters may sound enlightened and academically rooted, talking about arcane economic developmental theories, technological advancements, future earnings growth, world geo-political alliances ... etc. Such talk makes them appear so knowledgeable and credible ... definitely relevant to our times.

Though the jargon and the forecasting techniques may be different from twenty five-hundred years ago, the fact is that they are still making predictions about the future ... sometimes far, far into the future. And since time memorial, that realm remains as mysterious, dark and surprising as ever.

The Danger of Biased Forecasting

Whether by dint of astrology, modern quantitative models, or spirit-led advisors, there's absolutely no evidence that the reliability and accuracy of forecasts concerning the future affairs of mankind have improved. In fact, if anything, the accuracy of seers may have even worsened. Swings in public consensus beliefs seem to be more rapid and fickle than ever. Society is very quick to discard its financial prophets and gurus for new ones with more favorable predictions. Moreover, forecasting inaccuracies are widely evident to anyone who cares to read a month-old newspaper ... not to mention any forecasts of a decade earlier.

No doubt, all predictions must be considered highly suspect, especially those that make claims about the distant future — two, five or more years ahead. Yet, the forecasting business is booming as never before. It must be; there are more economists, brokers and financial planners than ever before.

Beware! Predictions have always been highly prone to certain forecaster biases — the itching ears of a willing audience, a heavy bent towards optimism, an indefatigable quest to find security in a volatile world, demagoguery contests, and of course, a love for monetary prosperity. With all these imperfections, forecasting nevertheless remains big business ... always has been. There was and will always be a large audience and clientele willing to pay for and listen to viewpoints that want to be heard.

We all identify with this innate tendency, preferring good news to bad, and see this tendency at work all around us. We all know people that continue to seek advice from others until they hear the view that they want. *"Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things,*

prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel," is what the people told Isaiah¹.

Similarities With Old Testament Times

Actually, the parallels with Jeremiah's age are many ... in fact, alarmingly so. Israel and Judah were living in heady economic times, in a fraternizing frenzy on the international political stage. They had taken up with strange and morally perverse ideologies, and were totally preoccupied with prosperity and gain in the material world. Godliness and eternity were far from the popular focus of the public arena. The two sister countries were over-run with self-anointed prophets — mostly politicians and priests — who were advancing their views of the future. Their visions were very similar ... stealing material from each other. What was their popular message in that day? In short: peace and prosperity for as far as the eye could see. Similar conditions exist today, particularly for much of the Western World ... uppermost North America.

The similarities do not stop there. Jeremiah was very critical of the practices and conditions of that day, his forecasts being in direct opposition to the popular entertainers. God was very displeased with Israel and Judah, so much so that His wrath followed in the form of Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. Near total economic destruction was the result. The books of the prophets tell us of the conditions that angered God in that age. Reading through these books several times, two realizations strike me: Firstly, how much of the sins of Israel and Judah had to do with commerce, trade and economics; secondly, how similar are conditions in our society today. Actually, conditions today may be even worse.

A good start on this road of personal discovery is to consider some of the statements made by Jeremiah, Hosea, and others and to compare them to prevailing conditions today. In the economic arena we discover that God was displeased with the extent of greed, complacency, arrogance of the rich, deceit, widespread corruption, financial oppression, pronounced wealth skew (a few super rich and many poor), conspiracy and high intrigue.

The following verses perfectly capture the mood of the times: "*When will be the New Moon over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?*" — *skimming the measure boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.*" (Hosea 8:5-6) We see that commerce and making money were uppermost in the minds of people. "How to get rich ... quick!" was a pervasive motive. No doubt, a presentation in the middle of the desert on the topic of how to double your money in two weeks would have pulled in big crowds in those days.

In the trample for wealth and gain, noble principles were crushed. Cheating and economic oppression were commonplace. The attitudes of business people were downright carnivorous. "*You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more than the stars of the sky, but like locusts they strip the land and then fly away.*" (Nahum 3:16) They would constantly and incessantly push productivity increases, whether through new technology or deceit. Every scrap was utilized and nothing left for the poor. Laborers were scrimped of their fair wages. Weigh scales were tampered with; labeled consumer products were sold with filler.

Of course, all of the above-mentioned practices are evident today in commerce. Hams are artificially impregnated with water to boost their weight. Purchasing agents extort the sellers for lower prices. Beef is pure beef as long as it doesn't have more than a certain percentage of filler. Chocolate containing 5% vegetable fat can still be called chocolate. Labor is treated as an inanimate commodity. The point of life after all is to profit ... to boost the stock prices ... to hoard wealth ... to stake a secure claim in the material world.

The Impact of Greed Upon Society

A materialistic society by necessity must be a greedy one. "*From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit.*" (Jeremiah 6:13) We see that all of society was infected with burning greed. Gain had become the motive and incentive for all human action. And in the competitive sweepstakes to accrete wealth, gold diggers needed to resort to deceit. After all, if everyone was seeking gain, an advantage was necessary to succeed.

One needed to be deceitful in order to win a bigger share of the pie. After a while, deceit became an accepted practice and society was “*blessing the greedy.*” Truth was sacrificed for one shekel more.

Greed was not just limited to the heathen or the non-believer. Rather, the deceitful practices driven by greed found a home in the highest institutions of the land including its priesthood. “*With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.*” (Ezekiel 33:31) That sounds little different than today.

A significant part of the church is teaching so-called godly principles for no other reason than to achieve greater success in winning “*increase*” and “*prosperity.*” Scripture is studied so as to be able to apply biblical principals to get rich as opposed to the purpose of worshipping and honoring God for Himself. Christians who aren’t prosperous (*read: wealthy, both in a relative and materialistic sense*) apparently don’t have enough faith. We are to believe that Christians, if they have been perfected in righteousness, will accumulate above average wealth in a world that is governed by an ungodly financial system.

Of course, that’s not to say that Christians can’t be wealthy (*notwithstanding the fact that it’s harder to get into heaven that way*). It’s just impossible that all can be rich. And, it’s even less likely that charitable Christians would be among the majority of that number. In my experience, businessmen that identify themselves as Christians are often no less treacherous in their dealings than unscrupulous operators who make no pretense of being ethical. The shark-like conduct systemized into our society’s commercial activities is so pervasive and accepted that it’s often difficult for us to see our weekday hypocrisy against our holy conduct on the Sabbath.

The pursuit of gain, aided with a good measure of deceit, in time leads to the hoarding of wealth. This presented a new challenge — arrogance and complacency. “*Ephraim boasts, ‘I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin.’*” (Hosea 12: 7-8) “*They all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain. ‘Come,’ each cries, ‘let me get wine! Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today, or even far better.’*” (Isaiah 56:12) “*Oh unfaithful daughter, you trust in your riches and say, ‘Who will attack me?’*” (Jeremiah 49:4 NIV)

Adulation of the Wealthy

Nowadays, review any magazine newsstand and we see wealth and arrogance idolized. The business magazines — *Forbes, Fortune, Money*, and many others — all dote on the powerful and the rich ad nauseum. Those that have accumulated great wealth are profiled for us to envy. They are scrutinized so as to discover their secrets of success. Most of them love to see themselves quoted and arrogantly ascribe their success to their acumen, wisdom, and possibly a bit of luck. The implied message is this: Since they’re rich, they must be intelligent and noble people.

The pervasive materialism of the prophet’s day resulted in complacency. With the great accumulation of wealth, surely tomorrow won’t be any different. Prosperity will continue. Why would anyone tamper with such a successful system of beliefs? Today, this same arrogance is expressed in many forms. Quantitative modeling is used to predict the future. These techniques, though they sound esoteric and sophisticated, are all based on a simple assumption that the future will be like the past. Some even openly claim that the superior mathematics of today have actually superseded the need for a belief in God. Like that society of old, what we see today is that society has put its trust in wealth, either real or its mathematical derivations.

When Desire For Wealth Supersedes Truth

The price of this headlong pursuit of wealth is that society agrees to sacrifice truth. “*From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit.*” (Jeremiah 8:10) “*They strengthen the hands of the evildoer so that no one turns from his wickedness.*” (Jeremiah 23:14) “*Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.*” (Isaiah 59:17) “*Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips.*” (Jeremiah 7:28) “*They make their tongue like a bow, to shoot lies; it is not by truth that they triumph in the lands.*”

(Jeremiah 9: 3) *“Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks with deceit. With his mouth each speaks cordially to his neighbor, but in his heart he sets a trap for him.”* (Jeremiah 9:8) There are too many similar verses to quote them all. The message is clear: Today, great success in worldly terms is likely to come with a heavy price ... the loss of truth, faithfulness and uprightness. In fact, it's gone far past this condition. Only the fit will survive, we are told. If you don't play the game, you'll be the victim. The message? Join in. Play the game vigorously.

Our entire society winks. When a toothpaste company says that if we use their product our teeth will be *“whiter than white”* we wink. Of course, nothing can be whiter than white. But, that's OK. We know that they're only trying to sell their product, after all. Wink, wink. Salesmen pitch their products based upon what they believe clients will want to hear, not what the product will actually deliver. Marketers openly agree that their practices are really a form of gamesmanship. A little artistic license is therefore necessary with the concept of truth.

We learn, too, that economic oppression was a condition of society during the time of the prophets. *“Among my people are wicked men who lie in wait like men who snare birds and like those who set traps to catch men. Like cages full of birds, their houses are full of deceit; they have become rich and powerful and have grown fat and sleek. Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it, they do not defend the rights of the poor.”* (Jeremiah 5: 26-28).

By and large, in a deceitful society driven by greed, it is generally (though not always) true that every winner must have a loser as its counterpart. The wealthy can only become super rich if there are many others who are less than rich ... or poor. To a degree, wealth is a relative concept. *“You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen.”* (Jeremiah 34:17) It's obvious that many people became enslaved by the economic system of that day.

Rising Debt and Financial Inequality

One reliable sign of increasing oppression is the trend of indebtedness. High debt levels indicate two conditions, one the mirror image of the other. The higher that debts soar, the greater the oppression. This is true both for individuals and sovereign nations. The handmaiden of high indebtedness is an increasing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” After all, debt is borrowed money. It must be borrowed from someone or some entity that has money to begin with. Therefore, the more borrowed money, the wealthier must be those that are lending it.

The more skewed the distribution of wealth in society or the world, the greater the oppression. Not only are debts higher today than ever before, what is true also is that wealth is more unevenly distributed today than ever before in modern financial history.

The *World Bank's* research indicates that the gap between rich and poor countries continues to widen. In 1993, the richest country had 72 times the wealth of the poorest on a per capita basis. This difference was only a factor of 3 in 1920. Elsewhere, *Forbes* survey of its list of 200 global billionaires topped out at well over \$1 trillion ... far more than the year prior. That's more than the entire annual economic output of China. This country has a population of approximately 1.25 billion people.

Imagine the state of the world's wealth skew: 200 individuals have more wealth than billions of the planet's poorest people! No doubt, there is extreme financial enslavement in the world today. *“They trample upon the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.”* (Amos 2:6-7) *“You trample upon the poor and force them to give you grain.”* (Amos 5: 11) All of the conditions referred to in this verse apply to today as never before. For example, the poorest nations today tend to be the commodity producing countries. It's not surprising then to discover that many commodity prices are no higher today in real terms than one hundred years ago.

Evidence of Collusion

Are there conspiracies at work today? Of course. They were evident 2500 years ago. *“Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord, who do their work in darkness and*

think *'Who will see us? Who will know?'*" (Isaiah 29:15 NIV) The dilemma of the commodity-producing countries alone raises the question. Conspiracies are seen everywhere today despite rafts of laws that seek to counter such behavior. An enormous amount of money is being plundered from shareholders today through the unprecedented use of employee stock options for senior corporate executives. Few are trying to stop it. Securities regulators, accounting standards organizations, investment analysts and portfolio managers all have complicity. It's been a lucrative game for those who are part of this conspiracy.

Why stop it? Corporations use aggressive and creative accounting practices to pump up their earnings in order to boost their share prices. Space doesn't allow a broad review of these techniques. The most heinous of these is the raiding of pension funds. It's being done today by some of the most recognizable companies in North America. Conspiracies abound in today's global financial environment.

We may have become inured to this fact: No other cause or objective is more noble these days than the pursuit of money. It's true, isn't it? Reading all of the indictments of the prophets of several millennia ago casts this reality into stark relief.

God's Judgments Similar to the Past?

Question to ponder: If God, who is slow-suffering, did not tolerate the sins of Israel and Judah 2500 years ago, would He be more inclined to turn a blind eye to the practices of so-called Christian nations today? Furthermore, would Christ allow his Church to be part of such a system of conduct today?

My humble view? I hardly dare answer as I am unworthy to make such an assessment. Yet, looking at the facts, the answer must surely be no. Isn't it true that much of the Church is indistinguishable from broader society in terms of its heart and main focus? A good part of the church is in the midst of the fray, trying to grab its share of financial prosperity. Saying this, I would be the first to admit that I carry personal culpability, too. Through the study and research of these issues, I have come to realize how much I have yet to face up to my own idolatries. I've been born and raised in this society; therefore my eyes are surely only partially opened to the moral reality of our day.

The Forecasts of the Prophets Not Reliable

A crucial fact to realize is this: Only a handful of the prophets of 2500 hundred years ago actually spoke the truth ... actually heard from God. *"They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds."* (Jeremiah 14: 14) The Old Testament prophets began their forecasting many years ahead of the calamities that eventually resulted. They weren't day-traders by any means. Their only interest was truth ... *the Truth*.

These prophets were more concerned about the road traveled, warning about where this path would ultimately lead. They had no interest in trying to predict the exact point that God's wrath would fall. They weren't making a living with timing services that tried to get their subscribers out of their real estate holdings not a moment too soon ... near the point that the Babylonians were crashing the city gates. If they were managing real estate portfolios, I doubt they would have been concerned about short-term timing. Neither is it likely that the prophets would have been cashing in on their "predictions" (things revealed to them by God) and trying to build a reputation for themselves.

Would they have tried to make themselves wealthy by setting up survival supply companies? These types of things were the furthest from their minds, I believe. They were singularly motivated to speak God's message. They were compelled. As unpopular as they were, it gave them relief simply to complete God's beckoning. To not prophesy would have filled them with even more anguish than did the rejection of society at large.

Jeremiah whined to God, *"I have never lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me."* (Jeremiah 15:10) He was not participating in a financial system that operated to oppress the poor and transfer wealth to the *"experts in greed"* by way of a loose credit culture. And because he wasn't,

apparently, people thought that Jeremiah was being judgmental. How dare he not endorse the “perpetual money machine” that was enriching a select few and oppressing the many.

Lessons for Our Day

Having briefly examined the economic conditions during the times of some of the Old Testament prophets, we discover two lessons that are relevant to our times today. Those who don’t want to endorse the prevailing system of greed will not have it easy. They will be seen as unwelcome misfits. They will be cursed as party-poopers.

The second message is that there is hope: Though conditions may seem difficult and insecurities may press in from every side, Jeremiah, with all his scare-mongering, provides a comforting promise: *“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”* (Jeremiah 17:7- 8) It’s a simple message: Trust not in gold, share portfolios ... etc. Trust in the Lord foremost, and there will be no reason to worry about droughts.

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If not otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible.

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ⁱ Isaiah 30:10-11