

# THE FIRE AND THE HAMMER

ALWYN THOMSON



pathways



# INTRODUCING PATHWAYS

This booklet by Alwyn Thomson, Research Officer at ECONI, is the third in the PATHWAYS series.

ECONI has previously voiced its concerns by identifying biblical principles pertinent to a Christian response to the Northern Ireland conflict and applying these to the situation in our community.

Now, a complementary process needs to take place.

Our goal with this series of booklets is to identify issues raised by the situation in Northern Ireland and to bring these to the Bible looking for guidance. We hope that the questions asked and the debate raised will enable God's people to find his paths and to walk in them.

Though some of these issues are controversial, ECONI is committed to the task of examining all aspects of the Northern Ireland situation in the light of God's word. ECONI believes that God has something relevant to say to the community and that God's people need to engage with his word and the hurts facing our community.

We invite others to join with us in understanding God's word to Northern Ireland.

As Evangelical Christians we confess the historic faith of the Gospel as it is revealed in the Bible. We affirm that the Bible, which is the Word of God, reveals God's plan of salvation, that it has been breathed into existence by the Holy Spirit, and that through it the Holy Spirit continues to speak. We therefore hold the Bible to be truthful, authoritative and, in both the Old and New Testaments, the only written Word of God.

We want our thinking and behaviour to be governed by these Scriptures, as our only infallible rule of faith and practice. In the complexities of Northern Ireland it is of paramount importance that we subject all our ideologies to the test of the Bible and order our lives according to its teachings.

Our primary aim is to address our fellow Evangelicals in order to encourage a continuing process of relating the Bible to our confused situation.

The rulers rule. The clergy carry on their ministrations as they have for generations. The people faithfully attend the place of worship, sing the hymns, say their prayers. God is on their side - they are sure of that - so the least they can do is keep up their religious practices.

ECONI 1997

ISBN 1 874324 95 6

Printed by GPS Colour Graphics Ltd.  
Design by Spring Graphics

THE  
FIRE  
AND  
THE  
HAMMER

Alwyn Thomson

“Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD,  
“and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”  
Jeremiah 23.29



# INTRODUCTION

Perhaps a few new practices have been introduced - but at its heart it is still the old time religion.

Certainly religion is important, but even so, the people still need time to relax and enjoy themselves - make some money, get on in life. Yes, some people get trampled on in the process but that's just how life is. There is nearly always someone else there to help them out of their difficulties. Of course, some of them are just lazy - they get what they deserve. The rest - the unfortunates - they will get by, things will pick up in time. In the meantime the people get on with their lives and enjoy the fruits of their hard work - signs indeed of God's blessing on their lives.

And yet... And yet...

Something is wrong. Something is skewed. In fact, it seems that everything is so skewed that it has become impossible to tell the true from the false. Everything is so skewed that this warped society gives the appearance of normality. Yet while the many remain blind to the flaws of their society, the few see through the falsity of it all. Among the few some stay quiet - trying to live as best they can, trying to maintain their integrity.

But there are the others - the few among the few; those who see not just a handful of unfortunate flaws, but a people at war with their God, at war with their ancient tradition, at war with their values, at war with their history, at war with their calling. They see a people confident in God's blessing, bringing upon themselves God's judgement. They read the ancient texts, they know the failings of the past, they know the wrath of God on false religion and on those who lead his people into idolatry, pride and complacency.

The few among the few hear the voice of God and are compelled to speak - whatever the cost. They speak the word of God, confident, not in themselves - far from it - but in the power of God, in his commitment to his word - the fire that consumes, the hammer that shatters the rock.

Sometimes they weep for the people, sometimes with the people, sometimes they are angry with the anger of God. Sometimes they doubt their own calling and message. Always, God calls them back to their task for the sake of his glory and his people's spiritual well-being.

Theirs is not a small God, desperately pleading for the belief of his people lest the dwindling of their faith destroy him.

Theirs is not a tame God, caged and pleading for attention, forever waiting for the titbits of worship they can spare to be thrown to him.

Theirs is not a God to be toyed with. He will not be reduced to a benign guarantor of wealth, peace and happiness. He will not allow worship to become mere magical incantations, his word to become a talisman assuring the user of endless blessing.

Their God is

“the LORD...the true God;

he is the living God, the eternal King.

When he is angry, the earth trembles;

the nations cannot endure his wrath.” (Jeremiah 10.10)



1

# THE STATE OF THE NATION

Each year, the President of the United States of America delivers a 'State of the Union' address - an end of term report on the national condition.

Doubtless, in the interests of their own political survival, successive Presidents have tended to look on the bright side of life - the 'feel-good' factor is important.

Yes, there may be rising unemployment, increasing poverty, racial tension, economic stagnation, but look on the bright side, it's not all doom and gloom, don't run your country down, things are going to get better!

The people of Israel had more than their fair share of leaders willing to tell them what they wanted to hear:

"Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace. No sword or famine will touch this land. You will not serve the king of Babylon. (see Jeremiah 6.14; 14.15; 27.9)

Yes, the nation is facing some difficulties - what nation doesn't? - but these are not insurmountable. All things considered, as a nation we have cause for optimism.

However, the real 'State of the Nation' speech was coming from another source. God, through his prophet Jeremiah, intended to tell his people a few home truths.

The favoured prophets proclaimed peace, prosperity and freedom. Perhaps a braver one might have declared Must try harder. But the message God's prophet declared was simple, unpopular and devastating...

## **The State of the Nation: Judah - 620 BC (Jeremiah 6)**

We are a people who have failed to hear the word of God.

We hear that word in the law - given to guide our life - but you have chosen to reject that law. (v 19) We hear that word day by day - God has not

stopped speaking to us. Yet today he speaks words, not of comfort, not of consolation, but words of warning. (v 8)

Yet still we, the people of God, have refused to listen to God. He is speaking but we have chosen not to listen. (v 10) We are a people who are on the wrong path. We have rejected the law and gone our own way. Now we face danger. (v 1)

If our future is to be secure, if it is to be a future of hope and blessing, we must hear again the word of the Lord - we must hear and respond and obey. (v 16-17) Of course, you will say, "We worship at the Temple, we make our sacrifices to God!" But I say, your religion is a sham and a lie! (v 20)

Yet while the word of the Lord may mean little to you, you are not an indifferent people. You are a people with many interests. You pursue wealth with a passion - gain is your goal and your ambition. (v 13) And the consequence of your passion is evil and oppression. (v 6)

Consider this very city, the city of Jerusalem, the city of David, the city of the Temple of the Lord God - this city is riddled with corruption and evil. It overflows with wickedness. Jerusalem is a place of destruction and violence. When I look on it I see sickness, I see disease. (v 7)

I look at those appointed to guide you in the way of the Lord and the knowledge of the law - the priests and the prophets. Yet I see no holiness, no purity, no love of God. Instead, I see deceit. They speak lies and call it truth. Worse still, they call it truth in the name of the Lord. (v 13)

I tell you, you are being deceived - hearing what you want to hear. You desire an easy message, a comforting message. They give you what you want - you hear it and are glad. (v 14)

They are deceiving themselves, they are deceiving you. Remember one thing, the Lord is not deceived.

You listen to them but will not hear the word of God when he speaks. You are a people without excuse. (v 10, 19)

You cannot continue in this way. You dare to mock God, to treat his word lightly, as a thing of no consequence? Look to the North, look and tremble.

Judgement is coming. (v 1, 22, 30)

Has there ever been such a thing?

Has a people that proclaims its loyalty to God, confident in its standing before him, ever managed to combine such religious fervour with such contempt for the word of God?

Has there ever been a people like this?

# THE PATIENCE OF GOD

## GOD'S PATIENCE HAS ITS LIMITS

Six words tell out the failings of the people of God:

*"This city must be punished; it is filled with **oppression**. As a well pours out its water, so she pours out her **wickedness**. **Violence** and **destruction** resound in her; her **sickness** and **wounds** are ever before me." (Jeremiah 6.6-7)*

This city was Jerusalem, the city of David, the place of the Temple where the Lord dwelt among his people - a constant, visible reminder of the glory and holiness of their God. This city lay at the heart of a nation uniquely privileged - called by God into a covenant relationship, given the very Word of God through Moses.

Yet the heart was diseased, the body weakened and poisoned. This was a nation, a people, who had presumed on their status as the chosen of God, a people who had neglected their covenant responsibilities, a people who counted on the blessings of obedience but had forgotten to obey, a people who had put far from their minds the consequences of disobedience.

This was a people who had tested the patience of God to its limits. There was a God "who has reached the limit of yearning and the far edge of compassion." (Walter Brueggemann). The Lord had endured this people's disobedience while calling them back to faithfulness. He had spoken to them through his word, through the prophets. He had warned them, he had called them to return (Jeremiah 11.1-17).

God in his patience did not send fire from the sky to destroy the people. Instead his goal was to refine them, to purge the evil from the community so that a right relationship could be restored, but they would not listen. The refining was in vain (Jeremiah 6.27-30).

Jeremiah was this people's last chance (Jeremiah 6.10,17,19). But rather than hear the word of God they ridiculed the prophet who spoke the word of God, preferring instead their false prophets with

their lying words. Resisting the word of God, their ridicule turned to fear and anger. One king burned the word of God, another imprisoned the man of God. Others, preferring the darkness of the false prophets, tried to consign the true prophet and his word to the darkness of a well shaft. (Jeremiah 37-38).

Finally, God's patience ran out.

Judgement was coming. The Babylonians - pagans, vicious warriors - would be the instruments in the hands of the Lord to punish his people.

Moreover, this punishment would not be a gentle thing, a mild rebuke. The people would suffer "disaster" and "destruction", a disaster that was the inevitable consequence of their disobedience (19).

There would be no escape from the judgement of God. There were no special cases, there could be no special pleading (11). Even the righteous prophet would suffer alongside his guilty people.

This people had tried the patience of God - now they had gone too far.

# THE LAST CHANCE

## **GOD'S MERCY OFFERS ONE LAST CHANCE**

This was a people who had reached a critical point in their journey - a crossroads. It was critical because this crossroads was on the path away from God, it was critical because God was about to come in anger and punish them.

This people had resisted the word of God. They had disregarded his gentler visitations, designed to refine and purify them. In his mercy, God, through his prophet Jeremiah, still reached out to them, inviting them back to a life of blessing and obedience in covenant relationship with him.

The people were being given a chance - warned of what was happening and what was coming. The people were being given an opportunity to repent, to restore their relationship with God, to escape his judgement.

They came to this crossroads at a time of threat and a time of decision, yet by the mercy of God it was also a time a time of opportunity and a time of grace. If the people returned to the Lord, the coming judgement might yet be averted (Jeremiah 3.1-4.4).

Through Jeremiah God called once more to the people, giving them yet another opportunity.

This is what the Lord says,  
 "Stand at the crossroads and look;  
 ask for the ancient paths,  
 ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
 and you will find rest for your souls.  
 But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'" (Jeremiah 6.16)

Jeremiah called the people to **STAND**

Each step you take brings you one step nearer judgement. You have ignored the word of God, you have ignored his prophets, choosing to listen instead to those who claim to know but distort the truth of God. Stop, so that the LORD can speak with you one more time before you make the fatal choice.

Stop, before it is too late.

Jeremiah called the people to LOOK

Look around you - look at the state of your society, look at the evil and wickedness. Look ahead of you - look at what is coming from the North, from Babylon. You have not been searching after the LORD. You have not been living by the covenant. You have been travelling this path to judgement, heads to the ground, believing you are on the right path.

Jeremiah called the people to ASK

You have lost your way. You must find the way again and urgently. Ask for that way - the good way, the ancient paths. They are the paths walked by Abraham, Moses and David. They are there in the law given by God, they are there in the words of the prophets sent by God.

Jeremiah called the people to WALK

The ancient paths are not hard to find - but you must walk them in obedience. You must act, you must make a decision, you must respond. You must set out on the road, on the journey where you will have as your companion the blessing of God. If you do this - and only this - you will find rest for your souls.

The people said - We Will Not!

Was it self-righteousness, complacency, indifference? Did they think Jeremiah a fool, a young upstart, a blasphemer who spoke against the Temple and the established order, a troubler of the people of God? Did they pray against him in their services? Did they denounce him and warn that God would judge him? In their piety were they blind to the word of God?

Whatever the reasons their answer was unmistakable - We Will Not!

That rejection of God's word, that final indication of hearts hardened against his word sealed their fate. The point came when it was too late for repentance by the people, when it was too late for the prayers of a righteous man (Jeremiah 7.16; 11.14; 15.1). God's decision was made and that decision was for judgement and exile.

Years passed - ten, perhaps more - but the judgement did not

come. Did the people consider themselves vindicated? Did Jeremiah wonder about the truth of his own words?

But God was faithful - in 598 BC the Babylonians came down from the North for the first time. Judah lost its independence, becoming a vassal state. The Babylonians came back in 587 BC. Jerusalem was burned, the Temple destroyed, the king blinded and imprisoned, the people deported (Jeremiah 52.1-16).

Yet even then, even in defeat, exile and death, the people rejected the word of the Lord given through Jeremiah. Even then, when his prophecies had been fulfilled, the people, having come to him to hear the word of the Lord, would not believe the word of the Lord (Jeremiah 42-43).

In spite of the people, in spite of their stubbornness, God, in his mercy, would bring them back to the land he had given them. But, before that, the people would endure seventy years of exile.



# THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD

Were the people of God in Jeremiah's day unique in their failings? Or are the people of God in every age vulnerable to the same failings?

Are the people of God in Northern Ireland unique - unique in our ability to avoid the traps and failings that brought God's judgement down on his people in other places at other times?

The very idea that God might be pronouncing judgement on us for our failings is not a pleasant thought to entertain. How much more comforting it is to believe that our sufferings are signs of satanic attack on the faithful people of God. While the experience may not be pleasant there is a comforting element to it - for if Satan is attacking us it is a sign that we are being faithful to the Lord. We can have confidence that all things are under the ultimate control of the sovereign God and that in his good time all will be well.

Yet, in the Bible, more often than not, it is not Satan who fights against the people of God, but the Lord himself (for example, Deuteronomy 28.62-64; Jeremiah 25.1-7; Ezekiel 12.15; Habbakuk 1.12-2.1). When we take his covenant lightly, he does not. When we are unfaithful, he is not. When we are disobedient, he remains faithful to his covenant - and that faithfulness means that sometimes God's people experience God's wrath. In such times as these God is not his people's defender but the judge of their sin and faithlessness.

Yet can it really be that God is angry with us? Throughout his book Jeremiah spells out for his people why God is judging them. This society is marked by greed and corruption; by oppression and exploitation of the poor, and indifference to their well-being; by a complacent, self-satisfied form of religion. Perhaps in the details we do not see ourselves in the same position as this people. But the fundamental problems have a frighteningly familiar ring. This is a religious community sure of its identity as the people of God - God is their God. Yet it is a community in which things have gone badly wrong - their God is their possession, their guarantor. Their God is on their side. They presumed on the blessings and security of their

relationship with God; they are deaf and blind to the warning signs.

Is this also a vision of our community? Are these characteristics of the evangelical community in Northern Ireland? Is God our guarantor? Is God on our side? Do we presume on God's presence, pleasure and blessing? Are we dismissive of his judgements? Are they to come only on others - the disobedient, the rebellious, the compromisers?

Could it be that we are more like the people of God in Jeremiah's day than we realise? Do we need to hear the word of Jeremiah, the word of God, in the same manner? Do we need to hear the same challenge?

And if Jeremiah came to the pulpits of our churches and preached in the streets of our towns and cities, what message would he proclaim? What failings might he find? What sins might he denounce as he looked at the people of God in Northern Ireland? How comfortable would we be with his words to us?

### **The State of the Nation: Northern Ireland 1997**

We are a people professing a strong allegiance to the word of God. Our cities and towns are filled with places of proclamation. We are a people who fill these places week by week to proclaim our loyalty to God and to hear his word made known.

We are a people who have taken this word beyond the streets of our own community and around the world.

We are a people on whom God has chosen to be merciful, pouring out his grace of salvation on so many.

Yet we are a people whose hearing of the word of God is compromised. We have made the weapon of God's Spirit into a weapon of our own beliefs.

We proclaim that we have set aside the idols of false religion, yet in their place we have established our idols of land and people.

We proclaim our worship of the Lord of all, the ruler of the heavens and the earth, yet we have made of him a tribal deity, invoking him to preserve our land.

We proclaim ourselves defenders and proclaimers of the truth of God, yet our

truth is loveless and graceless, sometimes vicious and embittered.

We proclaim ourselves to be hearers of the word, yet our ears are closed to the word that challenges our traditions.

We proclaim ourselves free from the bind of traditionalism, yet we maintain the word in a straitjacket of traditions - religious, social, political.

Will we refuse to acknowledge our failings, to see how we have compromised the truth of God with our traditions, dishonoured the name of God through our sin, stifled his word through our disobedience?

We wish only to see the fire and the hammer fall on others - our enemies, yet we do not wish it to fall on us, we see no need for it to fall on us. Yet perhaps the Lord God's anger is coming close to us. Perhaps the hammer is about to fall, perhaps the fire is about to consume. Perhaps they are poised above us and around us.

Can it really be so? Can it be that our enemy is the Lord? The very idea that we could have angered God, even as we go about our Christian lives is horrible to contemplate. Is our self-confidence that we know the mind of God, that we know his word, possibly blinding us to that word? Have we rejected those proclamations of the word of God that threaten our understanding? Have we dismissed them as confused, idealistic, half-baked, compromised, naive?

In all our practice of Christianity, in all our prayers and meetings and proclamations have we missed the point? Have we really closed our minds to the word of God? Have we been so convinced, that we have missed the gentler persuasions of God and tried his patience? Have we reached the point were in our supposed obedience we simply reinforce the horror of our disobedience? Has God reached the end of his tether with his people in this community? Will the next blow be altogether fiercer than anything we have experienced? And even then, will we believe?

Is God saying to us

This is what the Lord says,  
"Stand at the crossroads and look;  
ask for the ancient paths,

ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
and you will find rest for your souls.  
But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'" (Jeremiah 6.16)

# AT THE CROSSROADS

In December 1968 the then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Captain Terence O'Neill broadcast to the people of Northern Ireland as the community began its descent into the violence that has plagued us for nearly a generation. He said:

Ulster stands at the crossroads. I believe you know me well enough by now to appreciate that I am not a man given to extravagant language. But I must say to you this evening that our conduct over the coming days and weeks will decide our future. And as we face this situation, I would be failing in my duty to you as your Prime Minister if I did not put the issues, calmly and clearly, before you all. These items are far too serious to be determined behind closed doors, or left to noisy minorities. The time has come for the people as a whole to speak in a clear voice.

The path we chose at that time led us into a maelstrom of burning homes, ruined businesses and broken bodies; of bitterness, suspicion and sectarianism. The path has been a long one - we have travelled it for more than twenty five years. Over the years this place has changed - the physical geography has been dramatically transformed. Returning exiles find old familiar landmarks gone and unfamiliar ones standing in their place. Yet some things have not changed - as a community we continue to walk the same path.

Through the years many have suggested alternative paths - the way that will bring us peace: the Union, devolution, integration, independence, a united Ireland, an agreed Ireland, Ireland in Europe, community politics, class politics. These paths, we are assured, offer an alternative - a route away from violence, conflict, death and suspicion. Yet in our dispute we still walk the same path.

Since then, as individuals, as a community of God's people, or as a wider community we have stood at other crossroads and made other decisions - sometimes right decisions, sometimes wrong decisions.

As the people of God perhaps we have reached another

crossroads. Perhaps, now, God is calling us to stand at the crossroads, to look, to ask for the ancient paths and, having found them, to walk in them.

Yet there should be no mistaking the implications if we ask for the ancient paths, the good way, and choose to walk in it. It is too easy for us to long wistfully for a time when the churches were full, when the crowds stopped to hear the open-air preachers, when tracts were received with politeness. It is too easy to desire to go back to a time when we felt more comfortable, when we felt at ease in our community. It is too easy to assume that this was how God made it, this was how it should be. Perhaps even then in the comfort of our self-assurance the seeds that grew into the bitter harvest of the present were sown. Perhaps it was the 'old time religion' of the 'good old days' that blinded us to God's commands and desires and led us onto the wrong paths.

No matter how desirable the return to a time when things made more sense to us might be, this is not what God seeks. "This return to ancient paths is not a nostalgic return to 'old-time religion' or 'the good old days', but a return to a more radical and dangerous memory that serves to end all present complacency and to subvert all present certitudes" (Walter Brueggemann).

This is a hard thing: "to subvert all present certitude"? Surely, one of the most painful experiences of these last years has been the breaking down of all the things that we were confident of. Surely our certitudes have been battered and bruised sufficiently. Surely what we need is a renewed certitude.

Yet the command of God through the prophet recognises two realities. First, that the present certitude of the people was founded in the wrong thing. Second, that real certitude could be found only in a fresh understanding of and commitment to God - not God as he was understood by them at that time, but God as he wished to be known and as he revealed himself through the prophet.

These ancient paths that sound so comfortable, so familiar, so reassuring are nothing of the sort. To walk in these paths is to be willing to challenge every conviction, every certainty we have, no matter how dear, no matter how much these are part of us as people. It means to face the challenges that others will not. It means

to ask the questions that others dare not ask. It means to take the risks that others cannot take.

It means to look afresh at God's word - to set aside our convictions that we know and understand, to let the word loose from the cage of our Protestant and evangelical traditionalism that has bound it.

It means hearing God's word in order to be challenged and not simply to be confirmed. It means taking "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10.5). It means taking captive our thoughts about the political life of our society, about our political ambitions and goals, about our attitudes towards our neighbours, about where we find our identity as people, about our attitudes to peace, to justice, to holiness. It means exalting the grace of God through lives of obedience and holiness. It means standing against the false prophets who speak untruth in the name of God.

Is it any wonder that the people who heard Jeremiah's challenge said We Will Not? This people had established an identity they were comfortable with. They had remade God into the God they wanted and needed. They felt no need to let troublemakers like Jeremiah stir things up and cause bother.

Letting God loose, letting the word of God shine its light into every crack and crevice of their most deeply held values, convictions and beliefs was something they felt no need to do. So when God through the prophet called them to walk in the ancient paths Israel rejected this walk, because it called into question the values, beliefs and convictions that this people had committed itself to. The tragedy was that in rejecting this walk and choosing to walk in their own way, the people were rejecting their calling, rejecting the one thing that gave them an identity, a purpose and their security.

The challenge for the people of God in Northern Ireland is to face the same call and decide what our response will be. Will we too say We Will Not? Will we refuse to acknowledge that we too have lost the way, that we too have hard and painful decisions to make, that we too stand at the crossroads?





# CONCLUSION

## ARCHITECTS . . .

God set one vision of the future before his people:

Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

"Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!' If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever." (Jeremiah 7.2-7)

Before the judgement fell God held out to his people the opportunity to be the architects of their own future, building a society according to the plans set out by God.

They rejected his offer.

## ...OR VICTIMS?

God also set out an altogether darker vision of their future:

Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon," declares the LORD, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years." (Jeremiah 25.8-11)

Victims they were, but far from innocent.

As God's people in Northern Ireland, will we hear and heed his word? Will we be architects or will we be victims?



# STUDY GUIDE

## 1 THE STATE OF THE NATION

Jeremiah was confronted by false prophets who misled the people of God and their rulers. Whether with good intent or evil they were leading the people further away from repentance and closer to judgement.

If we had heard both messages, whom would we have believed?  
Are there people in churches in Northern Ireland who have misled God's people?  
How have they done so?

It seems that most that most of the people and leaders of Israel believed the false prophets and rejected the words of Jeremiah. Yet it was Jeremiah who spoke for God.

Should churches be more active in weighing the words of those who claim to speak for God?  
How can churches do so?  
Does your church actively seek the guidance of the Spirit in weighing the many words spoken in the name of God concerning the affairs of our community?

The false prophets may well have believed the truth of what they were speaking. We should not assume they acted or spoke with evil or malicious intent.

How should we deal with those professing Christians who sincerely believe they speak for God but whose views we conclude are harmful?  
Should we ignore them? Speak privately with them? Publicly challenge them? Has your church ever done so?  
How do we deal with them as people and as professing Christians?  
Or is it all so difficult, so awkward, so potentially divisive that we prefer to ignore it all and not get involved?  
Does this approach make us accomplices? Does it dishonour God and his word? And if so, what then shall we do?

Jeremiah did not have the option of ignoring it or avoiding the pain.

He was called by God to speak his word, the truth, a painful and shaming truth. Chapter six summarises many of the issues between God and his people.

**Are there particular themes from this indictment of Israel that strike you more than others? If so, why?**

**Are there themes that you see as directly relevant to the situation in our community Northern Ireland and to the Christian community in particular?**

## 2 THE PATIENCE OF GOD

Before God acted in judgement he patiently tried to refine and purge the people - to restore without destroying.

Are there things in the life of your church that need purged or refined? What are they?

Thinking of our community, do Christians need to be purged of sectarianism? Of bitterness? Of attitudes too driven by fear? Of hostility and suspicion of our neighbours?

Is there a willingness among Christians to face these things and deal with them?

Do you think these are real problems we have to face? Or are they overstated?

This people would not be refined. As a result God had "reached the limit of yearning and the far edge of compassion."

In our prayers, devotions, hymns and sermons we proclaim a God who loves us totally and unconditionally. He is the God of grace - merciful, patient and longsuffering, faithful when we are faithless. But have we missed something?

Is there room in your understanding of God for the conviction that his patience has a limit?

Do you ever feel that you have tested God's patience to the very limit?

Moving beyond the personal sphere, Jeremiah clearly indicates that God's patience was being tested by the values and behaviour of the wider community.

Do you think God's patience has been stretched by this community or by his church in its relationship with the community?

What kind of things do you think have tested his patience, or what kind of things do you think might result in God's patience running out?

Do we need to acknowledge that we have tested God's patience?

Should we repent? Privately or publicly?

Should we preach this message in our churches more urgently?

God's judgement on his people, when it came, was fearsome and all encompassing - even the righteous were caught up in it.

Could such a fate befall this province if we test God's patience too far?

What are we doing to warn our fellow Christians and our neighbours of what lies ahead of us?

Are we prepared to suffer the judgement along with our fellow believers and our neighbours?

How do you react to all this talk of judgement, disaster and destruction? Is it disturbing, frightening, unreal?

### 3 THE LAST CHANCE

Jeremiah clearly felt that the word of God was specific enough to address the particular failings of the people. From their asking they could gain sufficient understanding to walk - to follow God as they should.

How would you define the good way that Jeremiah speaks of?  
Is it a set of specific directions for our life and witness in this community with its particular problems? Is it a set of principles to be worked out?

Either way, what is the good way in Northern Ireland?

What role does the church have in working out the implications of the good way in this society? Has it fulfilled its role?

For Jeremiah, the problems of his society were the most important matter facing the people. These were the things that most concerned the Lord. Yet the people refused to recognise them or deal with them.

How important do you think the conflict and division in our society is in God's eyes?

Have Christians failed to give this community's problems the importance that God gives them?

Or do we see the conflict and division in our society as crucial problems we need to deal with?

If these are the most important challenges to us as a people as we find the way and walk in it, should we not have been applying ourselves to these issues much more thoroughly?

"God's decision was made." Jeremiah was told by God that a certain point had been reached when it was too late for repentance and too late for the prayers of the righteous to make a difference. The fate of the community was sealed.

How do you respond to the idea that a point might come at which it is too late even for the righteous to pray for the people?

And if we ever reach that point how do you think you would feel?

If there is still opportunity, do we pray enough?

When we pray, do we seek God's will or our own will?

And if the opportunity were to disappear, how much responsibility

would we bear?

Even if we did not create the situation, would we, by our lack of action, be responsible for the fate of our community?

### STAND - LOOK - ASK - WALK

If this is the word of God to us in Northern Ireland take some time to think through and respond to each of these commands.

**STAND** - Take some time to be quiet before God, to set aside our confidence and our certainty.

**LOOK** - Ask hard questions of ourselves, of our churches, of our society. Have we been faithful to God? Have we presumed on his grace and mercy? Have we be blind to his will for us? Have we been salt in our society over the last generation?

**ASK** - Bring our reflections to the Lord in confession and prayer. Acknowledge our position before God, our helplessness and weakness. Turn to him for guidance and direction - to find the ancient paths, the good way.

**WALK** - Discuss what Christians in this community must do if they are to walk in obedience and so know the blessing of God.



## 4 THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD

The prophecies of Jeremiah are full of predictions of judgement - against Israel and against the nations. Even the prophet himself could not escape when it came. Before it fell God warned the people, giving them an opportunity to change their ways. Thus God's wrath was an instrument of their salvation.

How comfortable are you with the image of God as wrathful judge? Do you find it reassuring? embarrassing? alien?  
Do you think that Christians have focused too much or too little on God as judge? Do we need more sermons on this theme?  
If God does judge the nations, how can we know when he is working in this way? Can you think of historical examples where it might be possible to say that God was acting in judgement? Are there examples from the history of Ireland?  
How do you feel about the idea that God acts in judgement against his own people? Or against the church in this country? Or against your church?

The people of Israel presumed on their relationship with God. It seems they could see no reason why God should judge them. Yet seen through God's eyes there was much that was wrong and judgement was coming.

When it finally came terrible things happened, there was great suffering and great loss. Undoubtedly it was hard for the people to see the hand of God at work. Yet even in the evil that came upon them God was working out his judgement - a judgement that would be the saving of them as a people.

Does God have cause to judge his people in this country? If so, what are those causes?  
How do you think of the church in Northern Ireland - a faithful remnant who have withstood satanic attack? Or a complacent people who have lost touch with the truth of God and stand at risk of judgement? Or some combination of these?  
How do you think of your church?

Against the complacency of the people Jeremiah launches one scathing

attack after another. His tone is relentless. If there was anything good to be said for these people Jeremiah did not seem to think it a factor.

Do you think there was nothing of worth in this society? Does this mean that any comparison with this society and ours will not hold?

Is it possible that the evil God saw overwhelmed what good there was? Is it possible that even when there is good God's anger against the evil might make it of no consequence?

Churches in Northern Ireland have a reputation for faithful preaching and evangelism, for contribution to missions, for pastoral care in difficult times. Is it possible that this reputation blinds us to our failings that are of ultimate concern to God? Could it be that many who heard Jeremiah were genuinely shocked? Might they have been unaware of what was happening in Israel?

Is it possible that many Christians do not know what has been done in God's name or done by those who profess faith in him over the years?

How can we deal with sins that are hidden by others but seen by God? What is our responsibility?

You might want to discuss or write down your own indictment of our society from God's perspective. What things would you single out?

Again, you could discuss or write down an indictment of the church in Northern Ireland from God's perspective. Again, what things would you single out?

## 5 AT THE CROSSROADS

Some crossroads matter more than others - a wrong turn in the sidestreets can be easily corrected. A wrong choice at a motorway junction can be more of a problem. What Jeremiah speaks of is a time of crucial choice - the last opportunity to change direction and get back on the right track.

Each of us has faced personal crossroads in life, but what crossroads have we reached - and passed - in our community life over the last 25 years?

More specifically, are there times over those years when you felt that the church stood at a crossroads? When was this? What choices were made?

Were these the right choices? Would different choices at different times have changed the course of the history of our community?

Or have we carried on unaware that God was calling us to choose?

"This return to ancient paths is not a nostalgic return to 'old-time religion' or 'the good old days', but a return to a more radical and dangerous memory that serves to end all present complacency and to subvert all present certitudes." The people of Israel recognised this and resisted God's demands, choosing instead to continue on the path that brought them to judgement.

Do you feel that there was a better time in the life of the church in this community? Were there once 'good-old days'? Does walking in the ancient paths mean for you a return to those days?

How do you understand this "more radical and dangerous memory"? How is it radical? Why is it dangerous?

What are the implications for us of choosing this way?

How might it affect your church? How might it affect your church's life and witness in the community?

As you look out on the community and the church, what things are you certain of? What is there that you can put your confidence in?

Do you feel that there is less that is certain now than used to be the case? Is that a cause for fear, anxiety?

**Is it possible that as a community God has been working to break the things that we perhaps put too much trust in so that we might put greater trust in him?**

“To walk in these paths is to be willing to challenge every conviction, every certainty we have, no matter how dear, no matter how much these are part of us as people.”

**Do you agree with this?**

**Practically, what might it mean for us?**

**As a people are we up to it?**



**THE FIRE  
AND THE  
HAMMER**  
ALWYN THOMSON

A complacent people had tried God's patience to the limit. God, in his mercy, offered one last chance through his prophet Jeremiah. As they stood at the crossroads what would they choose?

And what does Jeremiah's message to the people of God then have to say to the people of God now?

This is what the Lord says:

***"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."***

Jeremiah 6.16



12 Wellington Place,  
Belfast BT1 6GE

Price £2.00