

Jeremiah 6 — Refuseniks Have a Ministry

Originally presented as part of Bob Mendelsohn's 52-part teaching series on Jeremiah in 2021. References in the video to contemporary events or gatherings reflect the time of the original recording.

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Introduction

I mean no disrespect to those Russian-speaking Jewish people who were refused permission to emigrate from the former Soviet Union. The term “refusenik” became associated particularly with Soviet Jews who were denied permission to leave, and later the word came to be used more generally for someone who refuses or declines something. Languages morph, and words sometimes move from the specific to the general.

Jeremiah 6 is about refusal—not a casual reluctance, but a refusal so deeply held that we sense the sadness of God over his people. Truth is what God wanted to speak and what Jeremiah continued to proclaim to a refusenik people. Consequences are what Jeremiah sees coming and what he begs his people to avoid. The longing and aching in the chapter bring sadness to the prophet and, I hope, to each of us who reads his words. God speaks truth to his people, but what happens when his people simply refuse to listen?

Let's dig into this chapter and hear, really hear, what God is saying to our people.

God Initiates the War on Judah — Jeremiah 6:1–5

The theme of sudden destruction returns immediately. Jeremiah mentions Tekoa and Beth-Hakerem, places close enough to Jerusalem that his original hearers would have understood the geography of his warning. Tekoa, once the home of Amos, was about twelve miles south of Jerusalem, bordering the wilderness that extended east toward the Dead Sea. Facing an enemy coming from the north, the citizens of Jerusalem might naturally flee south toward Tekoa and then eastward into the comparative safety of the wilderness.

There is also a wonderful play on words here. Tekoa has at its root something sounding like t'kiah, the trumpet blast of the ram's horn. The trumpet was a warning device for our Jewish people, so the name itself fits Jeremiah's picture. Tekoa also carries an earlier biblical memory. In 2 Samuel 14, Joab summoned the woman of Tekoa to tell David a story designed to bring him to a realization about his estranged son Absalom. In that sense, Tekoa had already become a place associated not only with refuge but with conviction and reconciliation.

Beth-Hakerem may have been Ain Karim, about three miles west of Jerusalem, where remains associated with signal fires have been found. Another possibility is Ramat Rahel, about two miles south of Jerusalem, where remains of a fortress or palace have been excavated and where signal fires were also used. Whichever identification is correct, Jeremiah's message is unmistakable: alarm, trumpet, signal fire—warning! Danger is coming, and the people must not dismiss the warning.

The writer of Hebrews says, “See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking” (Hebrews 12:25). In the language of our chapter: don't be a refusenik.

And what is the warning? Evil is coming from the north. That evil is Babylon. Jeremiah introduces something we will encounter repeatedly: God can use another nation as the instrument of his judgment. When Israel walks away from the Lord and lives contrary to his ways, judgment follows. Yet the nation God uses as an instrument is not thereby declared righteous. God remains judge over that nation as well. Judah cannot assume that being the covenant people means there will never be consequences for rejecting the covenant God.

God Sends the Babylonians — Jeremiah 6:6–15

It is difficult to think of the Lord using the enemies of the Jewish people to bring judgment upon us. Yet Jeremiah presents even this within the relationship between God and his people. God tells Babylon how the siege will succeed: cut down the trees, build the siege ramp and come against Jerusalem. It is almost as if the coach in heaven hands Judah's playbook to Babylon. Whatever Judah thought would protect her would not be enough.

Why would God do this? Because Jerusalem was filled with injustice: violence, destruction, oppression and wickedness. Micah gives us that familiar summary of what God desires—to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Judah was doing none of those things. We were living for ourselves rather than for others, and certainly without concern for God's interests.

Jeremiah gives a devastating summary in verse 15: “They were not even ashamed at all; they did not even know how to blush.” Sin had ceased even to embarrass them. From the least to the greatest there was greed; from prophet to priest there was falsehood. Religious leaders treated the wounds of the people superficially, crying, “Peace, peace,” when there was no peace.

But underneath these sins lie something still more basic. Judah was not listening. Verse 10 asks, “To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear?” Their ears were closed and the word of the LORD had become a reproach to them.

Listening is more than possessing information. You can read something written thousands of miles away or thousands of years ago. But listening is relational. Listening means drawing near and giving yourself to the speaker. God did not merely want Judah to possess his words. He wanted his people.

The Reason Repeated — Jeremiah 6:16–23

There is no secret about Judah's sins. They have been accumulating since Jeremiah began speaking. But in verses 16–23 the Lord again exposes the heart of the problem.

“Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls.” What an offer. God points toward the good way and promises rest. And what is Judah's answer?

“We will not walk in it.”

God appoints watchmen and says, “Listen to the sound of the trumpet!” Their answer? “We will not listen.” **לֹא נִקְשֶׁׁיב** There it is. The refusenik heart. Then verse 19 makes the issue even clearer: “They have not listened to My words, and as for My law, they have rejected it also.” Not listening to God has become rejection of Torah.

וְיִמְאַסֵּׁן בְּרִי. Rejecting is refusing. Saying “nyet” to the Almighty is not the way to live. If we want the good way, the answer is remarkably straightforward: listen to God and walk in what he says.

Then comes another recurring problem: religious hypocrisy. Judah brings incense and sacrifices, but worship separated from humility, justice and obedience becomes merely religion. Isaiah had already spoken against exactly this kind of worship. God was not impressed by festivals and offerings when the lives of his people contradicted what they claimed to believe.

We should be careful here, because it is easy to point at ancient Judah and miss ourselves. I don't always live up to my own convictions. Neither do you. The answer is not pretending otherwise. The difference comes when we admit our sin and desire God's word to rule our lives rather than boasting in our rebellion. Humility admits the distance between what we profess and how we live and asks God to change us.

Suffering Is Real — Jeremiah 6:24–30

The final verses speak about the pain that is coming upon the Jewish people. Hands become limp. Anguish seizes them. Jeremiah compares it to the pain of childbirth. The destroyer is coming, and the suffering will be bitter.

But even suffering does not necessarily change a person. Verse 28 describes the people as stubbornly rebellious: **סָרְיִ סוֹרְרִים**

The repetition of the word amplifies the description. These are people entrenched in rebellion.

Then Jeremiah takes us into the workshop of a metal refiner. Fire is applied to the ore so that the impurities can be removed, but here the refining process fails. The bellows blow fiercely, the

heat is applied, but the wicked are not separated from the metal. Christopher J. H. Wright describes the final verdict as chilling, especially when those words were later remembered by people actually living in exile.¹

Jeremiah gives the verdict in verse 30: “They call them rejected silver, because the LORD has rejected them.” כֶּסֶף נִמְאָס קִרְאוּ לָהֶם כִּי־מֵאֵס יְהוָה בָּהֶם

And now the title comes back to us: refuseniks have a ministry. They refuse God, and eventually they discover the terrible consequence of persistent refusal.

That is not where we want to find ourselves. God calls us to live rightly, love mercy and walk humbly with him. Admit your sins. Do not refuse the One who is speaking. Listen to Torah and to his living Word, Yeshua.

Yeshua himself spoke about rejection in Matthew 21:42, citing the Psalms: the stone rejected by the builders became the chief cornerstone. Don't join the stone rejecters. Don't become a refusenik against the Lord. When he speaks, listen. When he calls, say yes.

Conclusion

God calls each of us to know him and walk with him. The warning of Jeremiah 6 is severe, but the warning itself demonstrates that God is still speaking. He calls his people away from stubbornness, hypocrisy and rejection and toward the good way.

The tragedy of Judah was not that God had failed to speak. He spoke repeatedly. He sent prophets. He sounded the trumpet. He appointed watchmen. He pointed toward the ancient paths and offered rest for their souls.

The tragedy was their answer: “We will not walk in it.” “We will not listen.” Jeremiah leaves us with the question of our own response. When God speaks, will we refuse—or will we listen?

What's Next?

Jeremiah 6 ends with rejected silver and a people who refuse to listen. Chapter 7 takes us directly into the next expression of that refusal: false worship.

God sends Jeremiah to the gate of the Temple in Jerusalem, where people are still coming to worship and still trusting in the Temple itself as evidence that everything must be all right. But religious activity cannot substitute for obedience. Jeremiah 7 begins a four-part sermon running through chapters 7–10: false worship, false prophets, false confidence and false gods. We begin at the Temple gate with a disturbing question: what good is worship when the worshippers refuse to listen to the God they claim to worship?

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014). The original teaching cites Wright in connection with Jeremiah 6:30 and the image of “rejected silver.”

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