

More Woes for the Prophet



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 23:14, 15; Jeremiah 20; Acts 2:37; Job 3; Jer. 18:1–10, 18–23.*

Memory Text: “O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, everyone mocketh me” (*Jeremiah 20:7*).

One thing anyone who has followed the Lord for any length of time will learn is that being a believer in Jesus and seeking to do His will do not guarantee an easy passage through life. After all, as we have been told, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (*2 Tim. 3:12, NKJV*). This is a truth that Jeremiah was surely learning for himself.

At the same time, however, what our faith can do for us in times of trial is give us a broader understanding upon which we can steady ourselves amid our struggles. That is, when unfair and unjust sufferings and trials come (and no question, so many of them are unfair and unjust), we don't have to be left alone with a sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness that people who don't know the Lord often feel. We can know something of the big picture, and the ultimate hope God offers us, no matter how dismal the present is, and from this knowledge—and hope—we can draw strength. Jeremiah knew something of this context, though at times he seemed to forget it and instead focused only on his woes.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 31.

Godless Priests and Prophets

Removed as we are by more than two thousand years chronologically from Judah, and perhaps even further removed culturally and socially, it's hard for us to understand all that was going on in the time of Jeremiah. When reading the Bible, especially the harsh warnings and threats that God uttered against the people, many people think that the Lord is portrayed here as harsh, mean, and vindictive. This, however, is a false understanding, based only on a superficial reading of the texts. Instead, what the Old Testament reveals is what the New Testament does as well: God loves humanity and wants it saved, but He does not force our choice. If we want to do wrong, even despite His pleas to us, we are free to do so. We just need to remember not only the consequences but that we were warned about them beforehand.

What were some of the evils that the Lord was dealing with in Judah?

What were some of the evils Jeremiah was prophesying against?

Jer. 23:14, 15; 5:26–31.

The litany of evils presented here is just a small sampling of what God's people had fallen into. Both the priests and prophets were "godless," an incredible irony considering that the priests were to be representatives of God, and the prophets to be spokesmen for Him. And this is just the beginning of the problems Jeremiah confronted.

The evils presented here come under a variety of types. There is the apostasy of the spiritual leaders; they also lead others to do evil "so that no one turns back from his wickedness" (*Jer. 23:14, NKJV*). Even when the Lord warns about coming judgment, the prophets tell them that it won't come. Meanwhile, as far as they were from God, they had forgotten the admonition about taking care of the orphans and about defending the poor (*Jer. 5:28*). In every way, the nation had fallen from the Lord. So much of the Bible, at least among the prophetic books of the Old Testament, records the Lord seeking to call His wayward people back. That is, despite all these evils, and more, He was willing to forgive them, heal them, and even restore them. But if they refused, what else could be done?

Jeremiah in the Stocks

The job of the prophets has always been to convey God’s message, not to count how many people accept or reject it. Generally, the number of those who accept what the prophets preach at the time they are preaching it is low. For example, though we don’t know how many were alive at the time of Noah, we can reasonably assume that the majority was not very receptive, given the small number that got into the ark. All through sacred history, this seems to be the pattern.

Read Jeremiah 20:1–6. What kind of reception did his message get?

To gain a better understanding of what was going on here, it’s best to read just what the words were that Jeremiah had prophesied, the words that got him in trouble with such a high official. In Jeremiah 19, we have some of that prophecy: God will bring “evil upon this place” (*Jer. 19:3*), He will cause the people to fall by the sword and their bodies to be eaten by birds and animals (*Jer. 19:7*), and He will cause the Judeans to cannibalize each other (*Jer. 19:9*).

Though no one would have been too happy to be the focus of such a prophecy, as a leader, Pashur was especially offended. As with most people, his initial reaction was to reject the message; after all, who would want to believe something that horrible? More than that, using his position, Pashur made the mistake of punishing the messenger. He had Jeremiah beaten according to the law (*Deut. 25:1–3*) and locked him up in stocks. Though Pashur released him the next day, this painful and humiliating experience didn’t stop Jeremiah from continuing to give his prophecy, this time not just against Judea but specifically against Pashur and his own family. Before long, the fate of Pashur and his family would be a horrifying example to all who would see them in the chains of captivity. This is also the first place in the book of Jeremiah in which Babylon is mentioned as the place of exile. (The chapters, and even sections of the chapters, are not in chronological order.)

Imagine hearing something like that prophesied against you. What do you think your initial reaction would be, as opposed to what it should be? (What should it be, anyway?) (*See Acts 2:37.*)

A Fire in His Bones

Jeremiah's harsh words to Pashur and the nation (*Jer. 20:4–6*) weren't his own; they were not uttered out of his anger at having been locked in the stocks for a day. They were the Lord's words to him for the people.

What comes after, though, comes directly from Jeremiah's own heart, written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is the heartfelt cry of a human being who simply doesn't like the situation he is in and is crying out about it.

Read Jeremiah 20:7–14. What is he saying? What does this teach us about his humanity, and our own humanity as well?

His words at first seem almost blasphemous. One wonders, though, why he would say that the Lord had deceived him when, right from the start, the Lord had warned him that he was going to face fierce opposition. Nevertheless, he complains, "Whenever I speak, all I am speaking is 'violence and destruction.' No wonder people are against me."

At the same time, what is the crucial significance of what he says in Jeremiah 20:9?

He would have liked to have given up and stopped preaching, but God's word was like a fire in his heart and a fire in his bones. What a powerful metaphor of someone who knew his calling and, despite the personal pain, was going to follow that calling no matter what. (We find similar thoughts written in Amos 3:8 and 1 Corinthians 9:16.)

All through these verses, we see the struggle Jeremiah faces; we can see the great controversy raging both outside and inside him. One minute he's praising God for rescuing the needy from the wicked; the next (as we will see tomorrow), he's cursing the day he was born.

Why is it so important, especially in terrible circumstances, to praise the Lord and to dwell upon all the ways that He has revealed His love to us?

“Cursed Be the Day”

Even the harshest critics of the Bible would have to concede a major point: the Bible does not gloss over human foibles and weaknesses. With the exception of the spotless and sinless Son of God, few Bible characters whose lives are presented in any detail in the Bible come away without their weaknesses and faults exposed. This goes even for the prophets. As stated before, the God these prophets served is perfect; the prophets who served Him were not. They, like the rest of us, were sinners in need of the righteousness of Christ to be credited to them by faith (*see Rom. 3:22*). From Noah to Peter, and everyone in between, all were sin-damaged creatures whose only hope was, as Ellen G. White says, to go before the Lord and say: “I have no merit or goodness whereby I may claim salvation, but I present before God the all-atoning blood of the spotless Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is my only plea. The name of Jesus gives me access to the Father. His ear, His heart, is open to my faintest pleading, and He supplies my deepest necessities.”—*Faith and Works*, p. 106.

Read Jeremiah 20:14–18. What does this passage tell us about the prophet’s state of mind concerning his own personal situation?

His words here, of course, remind us of Job’s, whose situation was much worse than Jeremiah’s (*see Job 3*). Though Jeremiah had the assurance that he was doing God’s will and the assurance that the Lord was with him, at this point the pain of his present situation consumed him. Whatever his intellectual understanding of what the truth was, for now it was overshadowed by his own sorrows.

At times, many people might find themselves in a similar situation: they might intellectually know all the promises of God, but they are so overwhelmed by sorrow and pain that these promises are pushed into the background, and all they can focus on is their immediate suffering. This is an understandable reaction; it doesn’t mean it’s a correct one, but it is understandable. What we see here again is the humanity of Jeremiah, which is similar to the humanity of us all.

Have you ever felt the way Jeremiah did here? If so, what did you learn from that experience that could help you better cope the next time you feel that way?

Plans Against the Prophet

Read Jeremiah 18:1–10. What important principles about prophetic interpretation do we find here?

In those same verses, what crucial spiritual principles do we find as well?

Despite all the evil, the Lord was still willing to give people a chance to repent. Hence, here, too, we see the grace of God being offered to those who will accept it. Even now, they still had time to turn around, despite all that they had done.

In these verses, too, we can see the conditionality of many prophecies: God says that He will do something, which is often to bring punishment. But if the people repent, He will not do what He said He would do. What He will do is conditional, depending upon how the people respond. Why would God do anything else? He would not admonish the people to turn from their evil ways and then still bring punishment upon them if they repented and turned from their evil ways. In such cases, He won't punish, and He explicitly says so in these texts.

Read Jeremiah 18:18–23. What reasons do the people believe they have for what they want to do to Jeremiah? What is Jeremiah's very human response?

How utterly frustrated Jeremiah must have felt to be condemned by people who attacked him because, they said, they wanted to save the "teaching of the law," the "counsels of the wise," and "the word from the prophets." How self-deceptive the heart really can be!

What lessons should we learn about how careful we need to be in doing things in the name of the Lord? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Thought: In Jeremiah 18:11–17, we find the Lord telling His people to stop doing the things that they are doing. Verse 11 says: “So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions” (*NIV*). Verse 12 basically has the Lord saying that He already knows they won’t listen to His warnings and pleas but that they will continue to walk in the “stubbornness of [their] evil hearts” (*vs. 12, NIV*). The Lord then tells what He will do because of their disobedience. This is one of many places in the Bible that show that God’s foreknowledge of our free choices in no way infringes upon those free choices. After all, why would the Lord have pleaded with them to turn from their evil if they didn’t have the freedom to obey or disobey Him? Then, too, why would He punish them for not obeying if they didn’t have the freedom to obey? What’s clear is that the Lord knew exactly what their free choices would be even before they made them. This crucial truth is also seen, for instance, in Deuteronomy 31:16–21. Even before the children of Israel enter the Promised Land, the Lord tells Moses that He knows they will “turn to other gods and worship them” (*Deut. 31:20, NIV*). Here is more evidence that God’s foreknowledge of our choices does not impinge on the freedom we have to make those choices.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the final question at the end of Thursday’s study. Who hasn’t heard people say that they were doing such and such because the Lord told them to? (With what can you respond to someone who says that?) Though there’s no question that God will lead us, in what ways can we test these leadings to make sure that they really are of the Lord?
- 2 Jeremiah said that the word of the Lord was like “a fire in his bones.” How can we keep that fire burning within us as well?
- 3 What can we find in the verses we looked at this week that can help us to understand what’s involved in revival and reformation? (After all, wasn’t that what the Lord was looking to do in His people?) For example, why is a sense of our own sinfulness so important for revival? With this in mind, why must the Cross, and the hope it offers, be central to revival as well?

Nothing but Faith: Part 2

The next morning John went to a campus prayer service where he prayed for the students who had needs and silently prayed for his own need.

A couple of hours later, he met a friend from Botswana on campus. “Is everything OK?” his friend asked.

“Yes,” John said, “everything is OK. God is in control.”

“How’s your mom?” the friend asked.

“She’s fine,” John answered. Then without thinking, he added, “But she’s worried about my school fees.”

“How much do you need?” the friend asked.

John needed 50,000 Zimbabwean dollars to register.

“Here’s 250 pula,” his friend said. At that time, the Botswanan currency was equivalent to 23,000 Zimbabwean dollars. John thanked his friend warmly.

John quickly found someone willing to exchange his pula for Zimbabwean dollars—at a rate that gave him 25,000 Zimbabwean dollars! John hurried to a phone to tell his mother that God had worked half a miracle.

“Mom,” he said, “can you please send Mercy [John’s sister] to the bank to deposit 25,000 [Zimbabwean] dollars?”

“John,” she answered, “you know I don’t have the money.”

“Just send Mercy to town,” John said. “God will provide the money.” His mother was puzzled, but she didn’t argue. So, she asked Mercy to go to town and wait for God to give her the money for John.

Meanwhile John went to town to deposit the money he had received into Solusi’s bank account, then he called his mother again.

“I’ve been trying to reach you!” she said. “Mercy met a friend of yours in town who had promised to give you some money for food, but you had already left for school. So, he asked Mercy to deposit it into your account. When Mercy told him how much you needed, it was more than he had planned to give; but when he opened his wallet, he had more than 25,000 Zimbabwean dollars. So, he gave Mercy the money for you. We just need to know Solusi’s account number so we can deposit it!”

John’s eyes filled with tears as he heard how God answered his prayers. He thanked his mother and his sister for helping to make the miracle happen.

Hurrying back to school, John arrived just minutes before the registrar’s office closed. His heart felt light, and his step was easy as he thought of how God had pulled off another miracle for a young man with nothing but faith.

More than 1,000 students are enrolled at Solusi University. Many, like John, are there by faith. The school is growing larger, and more space in the dining hall is needed. Thank you for supporting the Thirteenth Sabbath Mission offering.

JOHN MAVESERE was a theology student at Solusi University when this was written. He now serves the Lord in Zimbabwe.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jeremiah 20:1–18*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the reality of the great controversy in the suffering and pain that he or she goes through on this earth as a Christian.

Feel: Experience the same “burning fire in our bones” that motivated Jeremiah to continue along God’s way even in the face of persecution.

Do: Resolve to react positively when faced with resistance, keeping in mind the bigger picture of God’s plan.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Great Controversy

A How can we explain the problems and suffering we experience within the context of the great controversy?

B Why are we not simply chess figures being moved around on a cosmic chessboard by the main players of the great controversy?

II. Feel: Burning Fire

A Persecution can take on various shapes and forms. When have you experienced persecution for the sake of the gospel?

B What situations have there been in your life where keeping quiet about your faith would have been so much easier than speaking out?

III. Do: The Bigger Picture

A What keeps you going when you feel persecuted by problems and when suffering knocks at your door?

B What is the “bigger picture” that we should keep in mind?

► **Summary:** Jeremiah suffered strong resistance and persecution from the religious leadership of the nation. It was so strong that he repeatedly became very discouraged, even to the point of cursing his life. However, the message continued to burn in his bones, and the only way to relieve this burning was to continue to preach. Jeremiah was living the great controversy, and so are we.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jeremiah 20:7–9*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Once God has called us, there is no real alternative to following His call. We can fight it, run away from it, or rationalize it, but at the end of the day, only one reaction leads to true happiness, and that is following God’s bidding.

Just for Teachers: The great controversy is played out in the life of God’s followers, and Jeremiah suffered more than his share as a result of the wickedness that surrounded him from all sides. The religious establishment persecuted him, and he came to the point where he, like Job, cursed the day of his birth. However, keeping silent was even more difficult to bear, and he could not quench the fire that was burning inside him. He had to go on preaching. This week’s discussion should focus on the convicting power of God’s Word and the fact that we just cannot remain indifferent to God’s calling, whichever form this may take in our lives.

Opening Discussion: There are moments in time that make history, though recognition of their importance is understood mostly in hindsight. April 18, 1521, was a momentous day like that. The monk Martin Luther, following his excommunication, had been invited by Emperor Charles V to the Imperial Diet at Worms to recant his teachings before being declared an outlaw whom anybody could kill.

Even after a second hearing, Luther did not see any convincing reason to withdraw the theses he had nailed to the church door in Wittenberg less than four years before, nor his views expressed in numerous writings that were piled on a table in front of him. While Luther’s famous words, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise,” are possibly not part of the initial record of the proceedings; though they appear in the earliest printed edition of his speech, the words that conclude his speech at Worms express very much the same sentiment: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one’s conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen.”—Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 39.

These are the words of someone convicted by God's Word, someone who has a fire in his bones. When have you experienced moments in your life when you were convicted by God and could not do otherwise than stand up for His Word? Share your experience.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Jeremiah's struggle with his prophetic ministry (*Jer. 20:7–11*) culminated to the point that he cursed the day of his birth (*vss. 12–16*). This brings up strong literary connections with *Job 3* and the great controversy theme that is presented in the prologue to the book of *Job (Job 1–3)*. The theme plays out in Jeremiah's own life through the persecution he experiences by the religious leadership of Judah (*Jer. 20:1–6*) but also in the imagery of God as a potter, which illustrates the theological topic of conditional prophecy (*18:1–23*). Whatever the outcome, God is in control of the great controversy.

Bible Commentary

The Bible, in contrast to other sacred literature, is at times bluntly honest and open about human emotions that are not always holy. Jeremiah's struggle with his ministry is a good illustration of how God entertains even those desperate cries.

I. Cursing His Own Life (*Review Jeremiah 20:7–18 with your class.*)

Jeremiah's struggle with his prophetic ministry has been called his Gethsemane, with Jeremiah 20 as the final chapter of the "confessions of Jeremiah." Although God had forewarned him (*compare 1:8, 19*), Jeremiah felt he had become a laughingstock because the only message he had was "violence and plunder!" When the divine compulsion to preach God's message became more than unbearable (*compare God as a consuming fire, in Deut. 4:24*), Jeremiah turned to desperate thoughts of death by cursing the day of his birth (*Jer. 20:14–18*). This extended curse invokes Job, who saw himself being crunched between the wheels of the great controversy as Satan tried to disprove his loyalty to God (*compare Job 3:1–12*).

There are two interesting postscripts to this chapter: (1) this is the last of Jeremiah's confessions, which would point to the fact that he made peace with the divine fire within his bones; and (2) in the next chapter, King Zedekiah sends the political and religious leadership to inquire of Jeremiah, turning to God as a last resort in the face of the advancing Babylonian armies. Jeremiah's message was suddenly needed once more.

Consider This: How did God react in the Old Testament when His prophets

felt they could not go on anymore (for example, Elijah at Mount Horeb)? Did He reprimand them or chastise them for their negative thoughts?

II. Pashur (*Review Jeremiah 20:1–6 and Nehemiah 7:41 with your class.*)

Pashur was a religious leader, a chief officer in the temple who “struck” Jeremiah in response to his prophetic message, followed by the prophet’s confinement “in the stocks,” possibly a dungeon or an instrument of torture that restricted the prisoner’s movements (*compare Jer. 29:26, 2 Chron. 16:10*). In reaction, God through Jeremiah pronounced judgment on Pashur that included his captivity and death—and the captivity and death of all his friends—in Babylon.

However, very much like the men of Anathoth (*compare Jer. 11:18–23*), we find 1,247 sons of Pashur, about one hundred fifty years later in the time of Nehemiah, within the walls of Jerusalem after the exile. God had reversed judgment and preserved a remnant, even from the descendants of Pashur.

Consider This: Pashur did not want to listen to Jeremiah’s message, and he tried to silence him. In what ways are we in danger of trying to silence God’s Word to us?

III. Conditional Prophecy (*Review Jeremiah 18:1–23 with your class.*)

The image of God as a potter illustrates, on one hand, His sovereignty but, on the other, His tender and careful involvement in shaping the lives of nations and individuals, echoing the Creation account in Genesis 2. The reshaping of national and personal history is not dependent on God’s arbitrary whims but on the choices that humankind makes in relationship to Him: judgment as a result of persistence in sin and restoration as a consequence of repentance.

This divine involvement in history explains the presence of the sons of Pashur and the men of Anathoth in Jerusalem after the exile. It also sheds light on a number of prophecies in the Old Testament that were never literally fulfilled because of the unfaithfulness of Israel (for example, the vision of the temple in *Ezekiel 40–48*, which was never built). This concept is an important aspect of the great controversy theme that underlies Jeremiah’s struggle: God is merciful and patient with humanity and not a chess player who moves His human figures around on a cosmic chessboard, according to His whims.

Consider This: How do you experience your life within the context of the great controversy?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Jeremiah had to come to terms with the consistent judgment message he had to preach and the continued, and sometimes violent, opposition he experienced. The Christian message is still an unpopular one, even to this day, and resistance comes in many forms. We need to understand this conflict, as a class, within the context of the great controversy that is played out even stronger at the end of time.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ① Think of a time when you have experienced strong opposition because of your convictions as a Seventh-day Adventist. How have you dealt, and how should one ideally deal, with these experiences?
- ② Sometimes life can feel as though it has become too heavy a burden to bear. When have you experienced such moments when you thought it would have been better if you'd never been born? How can an understanding of the great controversy help us deal with feelings like that?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: God as a potter is a beautiful image that reminds us of Creation and His tender care for our well-being. It also points to God's sovereignty as He shapes and reshapes earth's, as well as our, personal histories. It is good to know that we are in the hands of a loving Potter who wants to have a close relationship with His human vessels.

Class/Individual Activities:

- ① Bring clay to class and invite some members to create simple vessels (like a bowl). Put a few dents in the new vessels to demonstrate how our disobedience to God destroys our perfect form. Then show that the potter can reshape a dented vessel into something beautiful again. Alternately, if such supplies are not available, turn this activity into a parable and share it with the class as a way of illustrating how God reshapes our broken lives.
- ② If possible, as a class, try to arrange a visit with a potter and ask questions about his or her work; then share with him or her the biblical image of God as a potter.

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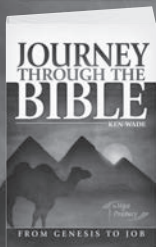
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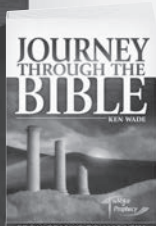
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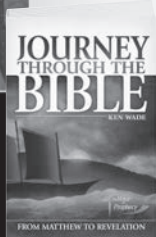
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