

Back to Egypt



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 40:7–16, Jeremiah 41–43, Exod. 16:3, Num. 16:13, Jeremiah 44.*

Memory Text: “‘May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the LORD your God sends you to tell us’” (*Jeremiah 42:5, NIV*).

This week's lesson brings us toward the end of the saga of Jeremiah the prophet. However, this is not an “and they lived happily ever after” ending. In a sense, one could summarize this week's study, and even a good portion of the book of Jeremiah, by saying that what we see here is an example of the limits of grace. That is, grace will not save those who utterly refuse to accept it. No matter how much the Lord spoke to them, offering them salvation, protection, redemption, peace, and prosperity, all but a tiny and faithful remnant scorned and rebuffed God's offer.

And what of Jeremiah? His was a life and work that from all human appearances seemed futile! The “weeping prophet” had plenty to weep about. Even after everything he warned about came to pass, the people still clung to their sins and paganism and rebellion, openly defying the prophet to his face and scorning the Word of the Lord to them.

How we need to be careful ourselves. Grace is grace because it's given to the undeserving, yes; but it's not forced on anyone. We must be willing to accept it.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 19.

Political Anarchy

One would think that with the destruction of the city and the total defeat by the Babylonians, all the people would have learned their lesson. Unfortunately, not all did, and the drama wasn't over yet.

Read Jeremiah 40:7–16. What message was given (again) to the people? What is the significance of the word *remnant* used in verse 11?

Despite the message of peace, and even the ensuing prosperity (*see Jer. 40:12*), not everyone was content with the status quo.

Read Jeremiah 41. What new problems would the “remnant” now face?

Though the reasons for the assassination weren't given, the fact that it had been done by someone of the “royal family and of the officers of the king” (*Jer. 41:1, NKJV*) suggests that these elitists still had not accepted the idea that the chosen nation needed to submit to Babylonian rule. Because Gedaliah had been put on the throne by the king of Babylon (*see Jer. 40:5*), these people might have seen him as a treasonous puppet who was disloyal to the nation and who therefore had to be eliminated along with his court.

As the chapter continues, we can see that this remnant now faced a new threat: fear of the Babylonians, who—perhaps not knowing the details of what happened—would seek revenge for the death of Gedaliah and the Babylonian soldiers (*see Jer. 41:3*).

The sins of Ishmael and his men caused fear among those who had nothing to do with those sins. What should this tell us about how, by our disobedience, we can bring pain and suffering to others, even those who had nothing to do with our sins?

Seeking Divine Guidance

Read Jeremiah 42. What powerful message is found there, not just for them, but for anyone who seeks guidance from the Lord in prayer?

Fearful of the Babylonians, the people seek out Jeremiah and ask him to pray for them for divine guidance. They must have known by now that Jeremiah was indeed a prophet of God, and what he said when he spoke in the name of the Lord would come true.

They also vowed they would do whatever God asked or commanded them to do. So, as we read, we see a people who seem to have learned their lesson, who want not only to know what God's will is but, more important, to follow it. The words—"Whether it is pleasing or displeasing, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God to whom we send you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the LORD our God" (*Jer. 42:6, NKJV*)—were a powerful confession of faith. After all that had happened, it was about time.

Notice the parallel here with Jeremiah's earlier messages: *don't trust in foreign powers. Trust in the Lord, and He will prosper you and He will deliver you when the time is right. Salvation isn't from anywhere or anyone else. The foreign powers didn't help you before, and they won't help you now.*

God has to warn them because He knows the tendency of their hearts: He knows that they are thinking of going back to Egypt (think of the symbolism here) in order to seek the protection they wanted. So, the Lord gave them very clear and specific commands not to do that, that such a course would bring ruin upon them.

Again, such a stark choice, the choice we all have to face: life and peace through faith and obedience to Jesus, or misery and death through lack of faith and lack of obedience. No matter the different circumstances, in the end the issue is the same for all of us. Unlike these people, we don't always have the warnings given to us so specifically and so clearly expressed, but we have been given the warnings just the same.

Life or death, blessing or cursing. What kind of choices are you making, every day, either for life or for death?

Returning to Egypt

If you haven't read ahead, Jeremiah 42 could be very exciting. What will the people do? Would they reach out in faith, a faith that is revealed in obedience, and remain in Judah? Or would they make the same mistakes that were made in the past, and instead of following a clear "thus saith the LORD," do what they want to do, despite the Lord's clear warning in the last few verses of chapter 42 about what would await them if they did go back to Egypt?

Read Jeremiah 43:1–7. What did they do?

When God's Word does not agree with our intentions or desires, we tend to have doubts about its divine origins. Likewise, the people and the leaders had doubts about Jeremiah. Apparently, in Israel, only the circumstances had changed, but the people remained the same in their thinking and in their heart. They excused themselves from their vow by attacking the prophet Jeremiah. However, they did not want to attack the aged Jeremiah directly. So, they blamed Baruch, his friend and sometimes scribe, and turned their wrath against him, claiming that he had turned the prophet against them.

Read Exodus 16:3 and Numbers 16:13. What parallels exist between what the people said to Jeremiah and what their ancestors said to Moses?

Human nature is human nature, always looking for someone else to blame for its problems, always looking for an excuse to do what it wants. Thus, for whatever reason, Baruch was accused of wanting all of his countrymen to die by the hand of the Babylonians or to be taken into exile there. Jeremiah 43:1–7 does not say why the people thought Baruch wanted this to happen, any more than Scripture explains why the children of Israel thought Moses wanted them to die in the wilderness after they had left Egypt. People in the thrall of emotions and passions may not have sound reasons for their thinking. How crucial it is, then, that we keep our passions and emotions submitted to the Lord!

How often do we allow emotions or passions to cloud our judgment or even override a clear "thus saith the LORD"? How can we protect ourselves from letting emotions and passions get the better of us? (See 2 Cor. 10:5.)

Taken Into Exile

Read Jeremiah 43:8–13. What did the Lord say through Jeremiah?

Tahpanhes was a town at the northeastern border of Egypt, that had significant fortifications and where a great number of Jewish colonists lived.

Here again, the Lord wants Jeremiah to act out a prophecy symbolically. Even though words are powerful, sometimes when things are done in real life, when they are acted out before us, the point comes through even more strongly.

How exactly Jeremiah was to bury stones at the entrance to Pharaoh's house, we aren't told. The point, however, was clear: even the mighty pharaohs were no match for the Lord, and He would fulfill His word just as He had said. The refugees who thought that they would find protection and safety by going to Egypt were as wrong as those who, as we saw earlier, thought that they could find protection and safety by having Egypt come to them (*Jer. 37:7, 8*). The Egyptian gods were useless, figments of warped imaginations; these gods were pagan abominations that kept the people in abject ignorance of truth. The Israelites should have known, as we should now know, that our only true protection and safety is in obeying the Lord.

“When self-denial becomes a part of our religion, we shall understand and do the will of God; for our eyes will be anointed with eye-salve so that we shall behold wonderful things out of his law. We shall see the path of obedience as the only path of safety. God holds his people responsible in proportion as the light of truth is brought to their understanding. The claims of his law are just and reasonable, and through the grace of Christ he expects us to fulfill his requirements.”—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 25, 1890.

Think about the symbolism, too, in the Israelites' going back to Egypt in their desire to find safety. How ironic! In a spiritual sense, what are ways that we could be tempted to “go back to Egypt” to find what we think we can't find with the Lord?

Open Defiance

Read Jeremiah 44:1–10. What were the captives doing in Egypt?

During the Egyptian captivity, Jeremiah had to face the same problem he had while he and his people had lived in Judah. At that time he had to talk to the leaders; now he had to talk to the common people, who in captivity were committing some of the same sins that brought this devastation on them to begin with.

What startling answer did they give to Jeremiah when confronted by their sins? (*Jer. 44:15–19*).

The hardness of their hearts and the deception that had overtaken them are astonishing. Basically, they looked Jeremiah in the face and defied him and what he spoke to them in “the name of the Lord.”

The rationale was simple: in the early days, before the reforms of Josiah, when they were heavily steeped in worshiping pagan gods, even burning incense to the “queen of heaven” and pouring out drink offerings to her, things went well for them. They were materially well off and dwelt in safety. However, it was only *after* the reforms of Josiah (which were too late) that calamity struck. So, why should they listen to Jeremiah and all his warnings?

Jeremiah’s response (*Jer. 44:20–30*) was, *No, you don’t understand. It was precisely because you did all these things that these calamities have come upon you. Worse, your stubborn refusal to change means that even more calamity will come, and the safety you thought you would find in Egypt is a deception and a lie, just like the pagan gods you worship. In the end, you will know the truth, but it will be too late.*

What about those who, steeped in sin and unbelief, seem to be doing very well, while at times faithful Christians go through terrible trials? How do we work our way through this reality?

Further Thought: All through the book of Jeremiah, as through all the Bible, we are confronted with the question of good and evil. And as Christians we know good from evil, because God has defined these terms for us in many different ways. (See, for example, *Rom. 7:7, Mic. 6:8, Josh. 24:15, Matt. 22:37–39, Deut. 12:8.*) But what if you don't believe in God? How can you know good from evil? Well, atheist author Sam Harris has a suggestion. He wrote a book called *The Moral Landscape*, in which he argues that good and evil can and should be understood only in terms of science. That is, the same way that science has helped us understand the difference between the strong nuclear force and the weak nuclear force, it should help us know right from wrong and good from evil. He even speculates that science might one day cure evil. "Consider what would happen if we discovered a cure for human evil. Imagine, for the sake of argument, that every relevant change in the human brain can be made cheaply, painlessly, and safely. The cure for psychopathy can be put directly into the food supply like vitamin D. Evil is now nothing more than a nutritional deficiency."—Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010), Kindle Edition, p. 109. Most scientists, however, even those who don't believe in God, would have a problem believing that science can solve these problems. If, however, you don't believe in God, where else can you find these solutions?

Discussion Questions:

- 1 "With us, everything depends on how we accept the Lord's terms."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 118. Why is it a mistake to assume that salvation comes with no condition? Conditions are not the same things as works, or something that gives us merit before God. How can we learn to differentiate between the false teaching of salvation by works (legalism) and the false teaching that salvation is nonconditional (cheap grace)?
- 2 Dwell more on the difficult question at the end of Thursday's study. If someone says: "I don't believe in Jesus, I don't even believe in God, and yet look at how well my life is going. In fact, I would say that my life is going better than yours, and you are a Christian," how would you respond?

All Things Work Together for Good

Like many young people in Africa, Siyoka migrated from his village to a larger town in search of a job. He lived with relatives and sent every cent he could back to his widowed mother and two younger brothers.

It was the music that first attracted him to the meetings held by Pastor Mbena; but when he heard the story of Jesus, Siyoka kept thinking about how wonderful it would be to go to heaven with Him, and to *never be hungry, sad, lonely, or afraid again!*

After the meetings, Siyoka returned home. Perhaps, someday, he could become a pastor too. The local elder who was in charge of following up with those who had attended the meetings thought Siyoka had lost interest when he left town. But at home Siyoka did whatever work he could to pay for his school fees, as well as care for the family garden. But that year the rains did not come. Sadly the villagers watched their crops wither and die. Sometimes there was a little rain but not the steady, soaking rains needed to bring life to the barren earth.

The famine was terrible. Many died and many more, including Siyoka, became sick. In desperation, his mother, seeing he was about to die, managed to bring him to a hospital in the nearest city. It was there that Pastor Mbena, visiting some of his church members, found him.

After relating these events, Siyoka's thin face lit up as he said in a weak whisper, "God is good, Pastor Mbena. He kept me from dying in the famine, and now I will be alive to see my people baptized. You will come to my village, won't you?"

"Yes, Siyoka, I must come to your village and hold some meetings so your people can learn about Jesus," answered the pastor warmly.

"Oh, they already know Jesus, Pastor!" Siyoka assured him earnestly. "There are 25 ready to be baptized. I told them everything I learned when I attended your meetings and taught them the songs too. I met with them every Sabbath. Even when the famine was really bad we prayed, and God answered our prayers. He brought me here so I could find you. When can you come?"

Pastor Mbena could hardly believe his ears. This boy who had had so little opportunity to learn had become a preacher for God! When Siyoka was well enough to go home, the pastor accompanied him. He visited the people and found that they had indeed been well taught. What a wonderful day it was when Siyoka and his 25 converts were baptized.

This story was written by CHARLOTTE ISHKANIAN.