

Correction and Punishment



SABBATH—OCTOBER 17

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Jeremiah 17:5–10; Jeremiah 17:1–4; John 3:19; Jeremiah 11:18–23; Jeremiah 12:1–4; Jeremiah 14:1–16.

MEMORY VERSE: “**LORD, heal me. Then I will be healed. Save me from my enemies. Then I will be saved. You are the one I praise**” (Jeremiah 17:14, NlrV).

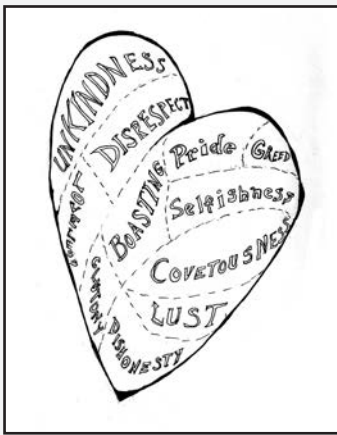
“EVERYTHING THAT HAS EVER BEEN WILL COME BACK AGAIN. Everything that has ever been done will be done again. Nothing is new on earth” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NlrV).

Nothing new on the earth? This is very true when it comes to the lives and work of God's prophets (special messengers). They were often called to deliver words of warning and rebuke (correction) to those who should have known better. The prophets tried to be faithful to their calling. But they faced strong opposition and even attacks from the spiritual leaders. It was no surprise when Jesus said, “ ‘How terrible for you, teachers of the law and Pharisees [religious leaders]! You pretenders! You build tombs for the prophets. You decorate the graves of the godly. And you say, “If we had lived in the days of those who lived before us, we wouldn't [would not] have done what they did. We wouldn't [would not] have helped to kill the prophets” ’ ” (Matthew 23:29, 30, NlrV).

This week we will start to study the trials (troubles) of Jeremiah. His ministry (work for God) seemed to be nothing but rebuke and retribution (punishment). Jeremiah gave the rebuke, and the leaders gave him punishment or revenge.

THE TWO WAYS (Jeremiah 17:5–10)

From the earliest chapters of Genesis to the last chapters of Revelation, the Bible presents to us only two choices on how to live. We either follow the Lord with all our heart and soul or we do not. Jesus spoke words that many have found bothersome. He said, “Anyone who is not with me is against me. Anyone who does not gather sheep with me scatters them” (Luke 11:23, NIV). This is a very powerful, clear statement about spiritual things—greater than we realize. It is the great controversy (war between Christ and Satan) theme (idea) at its most basic level. But still Jesus is not saying anything new or different. It has always been this way.



Our hearts and souls are evil; and so, we do not fully know just how bad we are.

Read Jeremiah 17:5–10. What important spiritual principles (rules) do we find here about the great controversy between Christ and Satan?

The meaning of these words probably explains Judah’s political connections with other nations. The Lord wanted them to understand that their only help was in God, not in political or military powers. This is a point that they would later learn but only after it was far too late. The Lord can and does use other people to help us. But in the end we must always put our trust only in Him. We can never know for sure the reasons of others. But we can always know that God wants only the best for us.

With good reason, Jeremiah 17:9 warns that the human heart is evil. The Hebrew verse says that the heart is more evil than “everything.” The terrible physical results of sin are not as bad as the spiritual results. The problem is that our hearts are already evil. So, we cannot fully know just how bad they really are. Jeremiah was soon to learn for himself how very bad human choices and desires can be.

How can you learn to trust in the Lord more than you have before? What are ways that you can step out in faith, right now, and do what is right in the eyes of the Lord?

THE SIN OF JUDAH (Jeremiah 17:1–4)

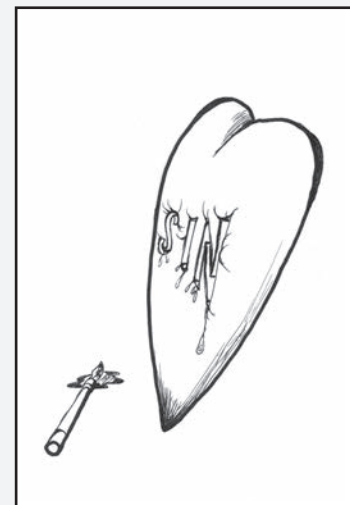
Certainly, Jeremiah's work was not going to be easy. Maybe some people might find strange and twisted joy in pointing out people's sins. But most would find it to be very unpleasant work. When people think you are criticizing them, they can get angry at you. Sometimes people hear the words of correction and repent (change for the better). But more often than not, most people do not change when the rebuke is very direct and strong. As with all of the prophets, the words of Jeremiah were direct and strong!

Read Jeremiah 17:1–4. What were some of the warnings that Jeremiah gave to the people?

The word-picture of sin engraved (written) on the heart is very powerful. It teaches us how deep sin is. The idea is not just that the sin is written there, as with a pen. But that it is *engraved* there, carved in with a tool. This all becomes even more powerful when we remember the words of the Lord to Judah's people who had lived in the past: "But you must obey the LORD your God. You must keep his commands and rules. They are written in this Scroll of the Law. You must turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 30:10, NIV; read also Psalm 40:8 and Jeremiah 31:33). It was out of their hearts that the people were to love God and obey His law. But now their sin is the breaking of that law (1 John 3:4). And instead sin is carved in their hearts.

"Let none who claim to be the keepers of God's law think that, because they may outwardly 'keep' the commandments, they can escape from God's punishment. Let none refuse to be corrected for evil. And they should not blame the servants of God for being too eager to do 'house-cleaning' to rid the church of evil-doing. A sin-hating God calls upon those who claim to keep His law to stop doing all kinds of sin."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 416.

Sin engraved on the heart? That is a scary thought! What does that word-picture say about just how deep the work of cleansing our hearts is? What is the only way to do it?



The word-picture of sin engraved (written) on the heart shows just how deep sin is.

THE WARNING TO JEREMIAH (Jeremiah 11:18–23)

“Here is the judgment. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. They loved darkness because what they did was evil” (John 3:19, NIV).

The sad story of Jeremiah is that his enemies were the very ones that the Lord was trying to save. The Lord wanted to save them from the serious punishment that was sure to come. But the problem is that people often do not want to hear what they need to hear. This is because it cuts against their sinful desires.



People don't want to hear what they need to hear because it cuts right through their sinful desires.

Read Jeremiah 11:18–23. What is going on here? What does the word-picture remind us of?

In Israel, during Bible times, those who falsely prophesied (spoke messages) in the name of the Lord could face death. But there is no example that the men of Anathoth thought Jeremiah was speaking falsely. Instead, it seemed that they just wanted him to shut up. They did not want to hear what he had to say. The verse does not say how they planned to kill him. But some scholars have thought that they might have been thinking of poisoning him.

As we find, too, Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown. And its people refused to accept his message. They even thought about killing him. But this was only the beginning of trouble for Jeremiah. A much larger group of people wanted to kill him later. The only people who did not want to kill him were a small group of people faithful to God.

Of course, all of this, including the description of the “lamb led to the slaughter” (KJV), makes us think about the sacrifice of Jesus. In a way, Jeremiah was an example of Christ. The same as Jesus, Jeremiah had many enemies who were the very ones he was trying to help. This situation in Jeremiah's life helps us to remember what Jesus also went through early in His ministry. (Read Luke 4:14–30.)

When was the last time you heard something that you knew was right, but you just did not want to hear it? What was your first opinion? In cases like this, why must we learn to take up our cross?

A SONG OF GRIEF (Jeremiah 12:1–4)

In the earliest chapters of Jeremiah, the Lord had warned His servant (Jeremiah) that his work as a prophet was not going to be easy. When God called Jeremiah as a prophet, He told him that Judah's princes, kings, priests, and people would "fight against" him (Jeremiah 1:19). Jeremiah was told that the Lord would support him and that his enemies would not "prevail [succeed] against" him (Jeremiah 1:19). No doubt the warning that most of his own people were going to fight him was not welcome news. But Jeremiah did not yet know the half of it. And when troubles came, he was upset and hurt.

What common issue is the prophet struggling with in Jeremiah 12:1–4? What is the prophet's attitude (feeling) toward those who are sinful? What does this tell us about how human the feelings are of even God's most faithful servants?

Jeremiah 12:1 is filled with Old Testament legal language: the Hebrew words for "righteous [holy]," "bring a case," and "justice" (NIV). They all appear in legal language. The prophet is upset over what he has been facing. So, he is bringing a "lawsuit" (read Deuteronomy 25:1) against the Lord. His complaint is a common one: Why do evil people always seem to be successful?

We can understand, too, how Jeremiah feels. He wants those who have done evil to be punished. He is not speaking here as a Bible scholar. He is speaking as a fallen human being in need of grace (mercy and forgiveness) who does not understand why these things are happening. As God's servant, called to declare God's truth to a rebellious (fighting against God) people, why should Jeremiah be a victim of the evil plans of his own village? Jeremiah trusted in the Lord, but he surely did not understand why things were happening the way they were.

How can we learn to trust in the Lord, even though bad things happen that do not seem to make sense to us?

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A SERIOUS SITUATION (Jeremiah 14:1–10)

Read Jeremiah 14:1–10. What is happening here?

Drought (without rain) hit all of the land. Every city, town, and village suffered. The poor and the rich suffered together. Not even the wildlife could live through this time when there was no water. The rich people waited for their servants at the city gates. They hoped they had found water. But the springs had dried up. There was no water. And without water, life could not continue. Their suffering grew from day to day. The people put on mourning clothes and walked with their eyes looking down. Then they would suddenly kneel and cry out in serious prayer.

At the time of such a serious problem as this, it was common for people to visit the temple in Jerusalem (Joel 1:13, 14; Joel 2:15–17) to fast and to make special offerings to God.

Jeremiah saw the eagerness of the people. But he knew well that they did not want the Lord. They only wanted water. This saddened the prophet further. Jeremiah was also praying, not for water but for the mercy and presence of God.

Jeremiah understood that this was only the beginning of the troubles to come. God knew the hearts of the people and knew that if He were to remove the drought, then the repentance (sorrow for sin) would also disappear. The people did everything to try to change their situation, including going to Jerusalem, praying, fasting, putting on sackcloth, and making offerings. But they forgot one thing: true conversion (change; a new life), true repentance. They were looking only to remove the results of the problem, not the problem itself. The real problem was their sin and disobedience.



In the terrible dry spell, Jeremiah knew the people did not want the Lord, only the water.

DEFINITIONS

1. intercessory prayer—praying for other people.

Read Jeremiah 14:11–16. How do we understand this?

“Do not pray for this people, for their good,” God told Jeremiah. Jeremiah had earlier presented a great example of intercessory prayer:¹ “Our sins are a witness against us. LORD, do something for the honor of your name” (Jeremiah 14:7, Nlrv). We are told to “never stop praying” (1 Thessalonians 5:17, Nlrv). But the Lord, who knows everything from beginning to end, is showing Jeremiah just how evil and fallen these people are. Of course, God knows people’s hearts. And God knows the future. We do not. So, the New Testament advice to pray, even for our enemies, does not lose any of its power here.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Jeremiah struggled with a question that we all do: How do we make sense of evil? But maybe that is the problem. We try to make sense of what is not sensible or what could even be judged as “nonsense.”

In this regard, Ellen G. White wrote: “It is impossible to explain the beginning of sin so as to give a reason for it. . . . Sin is an outsider. There is no reason for its presence. It is mysterious and unexplainable. To excuse it is to defend it. If we could find a cause for it, then it would stop being sin.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pages 492, 493. Replace the word *sin* with *evil* and the statement works just as well: *It is impossible to explain the beginning of evil so as to give a reason for it. . . . Evil is an outsider. There is no reason for its presence. It is mysterious and unexplainable. To excuse it is to defend it. If we could find a cause for it, then it would stop being evil.*

When terrible things happen, people say, or we ourselves think: *I do not understand this. It does not make sense.* Well, there is a good reason that we do not understand it. It is *not* understandable. Suppose we could understand it. Suppose it made sense. Suppose it fit into some sensible plan. Then it would not be that evil. It would not be that serious because it would serve a sensible purpose. How important it is that we remember that evil, and sin too often cannot be explained. But what we do have is what happened on the Cross. This teaches us about the love and goodness of God, no matter how terrible the evil is that sin has caused to happen.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

① Think more deeply about this idea that evil and suffering do not make sense. And they do not have a sensible or good explanation. Why is it better that way? Think about it. Something terrible happens. Perhaps a young child dies of a terrible disease after years of suffering. Do we really want to believe that there is a good and sensible reason for this? Is it not better to explain it as the terrible and evil results of living in a fallen world? Discuss in class.