

More Problems for the Prophet (Special Messenger)



SABBATH—OCTOBER 24

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Jeremiah 23:14, 15; Jeremiah 20; Acts 2:37; Job 3; Jeremiah 18:1–10, 18–23.

MEMORY VERSE: “LORD, you tricked me, and I was tricked. You overpowered me and won. People make fun of me all day long. Everyone laughs at me” (Jeremiah 20:7, NlrV).

CHRISTIANS SOON LEARN THAT BEING A BELIEVER IN JESUS AND TRYING TO DO HIS WILL DOES NOT MEAN THAT LIFE WILL BE SMOOTH AND EASY. And we have been told, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be treated badly” (2 Timothy 3:12, NlrV). This is a truth that Jeremiah was surely learning for himself.

But, at the same time, our faith can help us better understand why life is sometimes rough. This will then give us more courage to move on. When unfair suffering and troubles come, we do not have to think that life is meaningless and useless. This is how people who do not know the Lord often think and feel. We can know something of the big picture and of the great hope that God offers us. It does not matter at all how dark and hopeless the present seems to us. And from this knowledge and hope we can receive strength. Jeremiah knew something about this idea, but at times he seemed to forget it and to worry too much about his troubles.

GODLESS PRIESTS AND PROPHETS (Jeremiah 23:14)

We are more than two thousand years away from what happened in Judah during Jeremiah's time. So, it is hard for us to understand all that was going on back then. When we read in the Bible about the stern warnings that God spoke against the people, many people think that the Lord is too mean and strict. But this is a false understanding. Instead, what the Old and New Testaments teach us is that God loves people and wants them saved. But He does not force our choice. If we want to do wrong, we are free to do so. We just need to remember not only the results but also that we were warned about them before we sinned.

What were some of the evils that the Lord was dealing with in Judah? What were some of the evils Jeremiah was warning against? Read Jeremiah 23:14, 15 and Jeremiah 5:26–31.

The list of evils presented here is just a small example of what God's people had fallen into. Both the priests and prophets were "godless." It is almost unbelievable because the priests were supposed to be representatives of God. And the prophets were to be messengers for Him. And this is just the beginning of the problems Jeremiah faced.

The evils found here are of different kinds. There is the backsliding of the spiritual leaders. They also lead others to do evil so that "the people do not turn from their sinful ways" (Jeremiah 23:14, NIV). Even when the Lord warns about coming judgment, the false prophets tell them that it will not come. Meanwhile, as far as they were from God, they had forgotten the warning about taking care of the orphans and about defending the poor (Jeremiah 5:28). In every way, the nation had fallen from the Lord. So much of the Bible tells of the Lord trying to call His backsliding people back. No matter what evil thing the people did, the Lord was willing to forgive them, heal them, and even restore (make new; repair) them. But if they refused, what could He do?



The people had forgotten to take care of orphans and the poor.

JEREMIAH IN THE STOCKS¹ (Jeremiah 20:1–6)

The job of the prophets has always been to give God's message and not to count how many people accept or refuse to accept it. The number of those who accept what the prophets preach at the time they are preaching it is often low. For example, we do not know how many were alive at the time of Noah. But we can guess that most of the people did not accept his message because only eight of them got into the ark. All through Bible history, the result seems to be the same.

Read Jeremiah 20:1–6. How did the people receive Jeremiah's message?



Jeremiah was beaten for preaching God's word and locked in stocks.

For us to gain a better understanding of what was going on here, it is best to read just what the words were that Jeremiah had prophesied (spoken from God). They were the words that got him into trouble with an important leader. In Jeremiah 19, we have some of that prophecy: God will bring "evil upon this place" (Jeremiah 19:3, KJV), He will cause the people to die by the sword and their bodies to be eaten by birds and animals (Jeremiah 19:7). And He will cause the Judeans to eat one another (Jeremiah 19:9).

No one would want to be the person such a prophecy (special message) was talking about. So, Pashur felt very insulted. As with most people, Pashur's first feeling was to refuse to accept the message. Who would want to believe something that terrible? Using his position, Pashur made the mistake of punishing the messenger (Jeremiah). He had Jeremiah beaten according to the law (Deuteronomy 25:1–3) and locked him up in stocks. Pashur released him the next day. But this painful and humbling experience did not stop Jeremiah from continuing to give his prophecy. This time the prophecy was against Pashur and his own family. Before long, Pashur and his family would be a terrible example to all who would see them in chains as prisoners of Babylon. This is also the first time in the book of Jeremiah in which Babylon is named as the place where the Jews would end up as prisoners. (The chapters, and even parts of the chapters, are not in the exact order in which the events they talk about happen.)

Imagine finding out that something like that is prophesied against you. What do you think your first feeling would be, as opposed to what it should be? Read Acts 2:37.

DEFINITIONS

1. stocks—a wooden frame with holes in it for a person's feet, hands, or head that was used in the past as a form of punishment.

A FIRE IN HIS BONES (Jeremiah 20:7–14)

Jeremiah's strong words to Pashur in Jeremiah 20:4–6 and earlier to the nation (Jeremiah 2:4–6) were not his own. They were not spoken out of his anger, even though he had been locked in the stocks for a day. They were the Lord's words to him for the people.

What comes afterward (Jeremiah 20:7–14) comes directly from Jeremiah's own heart. It was written down with the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is the heartfelt cry of a human who simply does not like the situation he is in and is crying out about it.

Read Jeremiah 20:7–14. What is Jeremiah saying in these verses? What does this teach us about who he is as a human and ourselves as humans too?

Jeremiah's words at first seem almost blasphemous.² One wonders why he would say that the Lord had tricked him when the Lord had warned him early in his career that he was going to face rough times. But still, Jeremiah 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 important meaning of what he says in Jeremiah 20:9?

Jeremiah 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 example of someone who knew his duty. No matter what his personal pain was, Jeremiah was going to do his duty anyway. (We find the same kind of thoughts written in Amos 3:8 and 1 Corinthians 9:16.)

All through these verses, we find examples of the struggle Jeremiah faces. We can learn about the great controversy (war) going on both outside and inside him. One minute Jeremiah is praising God for rescuing the needy from the wicked. The next (as we will discover tomorrow), he is cursing the day he was born.

In terrible situations, why is it so important to praise the Lord and to remember all the ways that He has shown His love to us?



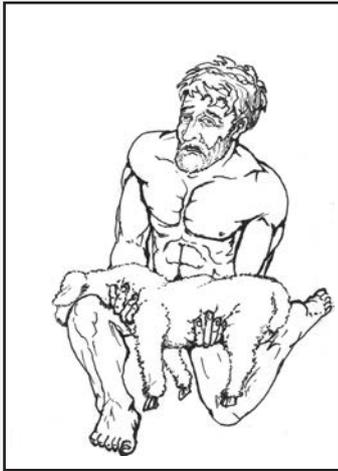
God was like a fire in Jeremiah's heart and in his bones.

DEFINITIONS

2. blasphemous—great disrespect shown to God or to what is holy.

“CURSED BE THE DAY” (Jeremiah 20:14–18)

Even the biggest critics of the Bible would have to admit an important point. The Bible does not cover up human weaknesses. With the exception of the spotless and sinless Son of God, few Bible characters come away without their weaknesses and faults shown. This goes even for the prophets. As written before, the God these prophets served is perfect. But the prophets who served Him were not. Like the rest of us, they were sinners in need of the righteousness (cleansing blood) of Christ to be given to them by faith (read Romans 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 goodness through which I may claim salvation. But I present before God the all-atoning [cleansing] blood of the spotless Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world. This is my only plea. The name of Jesus gives me the right to reach the Father. His ear, His heart, is open to my faintest pleading. And He takes care of my deepest needs.”—Adapted from *Faith and Works*, page 106.



“I present before God the cleansing blood of the spotless Lamb of God.”

Read Jeremiah 20:14–18. What do these verses tell us about the condition of the prophet’s mind about his own personal situation?

Jeremiah’s words here remind us of Job’s. Job’s situation was much worse than Jeremiah’s (read Job 3). Jeremiah had the assurance (promise) that he was doing God’s will, and the assurance the Lord was with him. But at this point the pain of his present situation overtook him. Whatever his understanding of the truth was, for now it was overshadowed by his own sorrows.

At times, many people might find themselves in the same kind of situation. They might know all the promises of God. But they are so overtaken by sorrow and pain that these promises are pushed into the background. And all they can think of is their present suffering. This is an understandable feeling. It does not mean it is a correct one, but it is understandable. What we find here again is Jeremiah as a human. It is the same with all of us as humans.

Have you ever felt the way Jeremiah did here? If so, what did you learn from that experience that could help you better to deal with your own pain the next time you suffer?

PLANS AGAINST THE PROPHET (Jeremiah 18:1–10)

Read Jeremiah 18:1–10. What important principles (rules) about interpreting prophecies do we find here?

In those same verses, what important spiritual principles do we find too?

Evil was everywhere. But the Lord was still willing to give people a chance to repent (turn away from sin). So, here, too, we find the grace (forgiveness and mercy) of God being offered to those who will accept it. Even now, they still had time to turn around, no matter what they had done.

In these verses, too, we find that many prophecies depend on conditions. 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 depends on how people answer Him. Why would God do anything else? He would not warn the people to turn from their evil ways and then still punish them if they repented and turned from their evil ways. In such cases, He will not punish, and He clearly says so in these verses.

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 answer?

How very frustrated Jeremiah must have felt to be attacked by people who thought they upheld the law. They said they wanted to save the “teaching of the law,” the “counsels of the wise,” and “the word from the prophets.” How deceived the human 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.

ADDITIONAL 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 [change for the better] your ways and your actions” (NIV). Verse 12 has the Lord saying that He already knows they will not listen to His warnings and pleas but that they will continue to walk in the “stubbornness of [their] evil hearts” (NIV). The Lord then tells what He will do because of their disobedience. This is one of many places in the Bible that explains that God’s foreknowledge of our free choices has no influence on those free choices. After all, why would the Lord have pleaded with them to turn from their evil if they did not have the freedom to obey or disobey Him? Then, too, why would He punish them for not obeying if they did not have the freedom to obey? What is clear is that the Lord knew exactly what their free choices would be even before they made them. This important truth is found also 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’ ” (Deuteronomy 31:20, NIV). Here is more proof that God’s foreknowledge of our choices does not change the freedom we have to make those choices.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Think more deeply about the final question at the end of Thursday’s study. Who does not know of people who say that they are doing such and such because the Lord told them to? What answer can you give to someone who says that? There is no question that God will lead us. But in what ways can we test these leadings to make sure that they really belong to 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 too?
- ③ What can we find in the verses we studied this week that can help us to understand what is required in revival and reformation?³ (After all, was that not what the Lord was seeking to do in His people?) For example, why is a sense of our own sinfulness so important for revival (new spiritual life)? With this in mind, why must the Cross, and the hope it offers, be important to revival too?

DEFINITIONS

3. revival and reformation—a time when people feel the need to change their spiritual lives for the better.