

Jeremiah's Yoke¹



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 21

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Jeremiah 16:1–13; Hosea 1:1–3; Jeremiah 27:1–18; Daniel 4:25; Jeremiah 28; 2 Timothy 4:3, 4.

MEMORY VERSE: “Then he said to all of them, ‘If anyone wants to follow me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross every day and follow me’” (Luke 9:23, NlrV).

AS WE HAVE ALREADY FOUND, GOD'S PROPHETS (SPECIAL MESSENGERS) PREACHED NOT ONLY THROUGH WORDS BUT ALSO THROUGH LESSONS THAT WERE ACTED OUT IN REAL LIFE.

So, Jeremiah again was called to “live out” the words he was to give. First, he had to wear a wooden yoke.

“The LORD said, ‘Make a yoke out of ropes and wooden boards. Put it on your neck’” (Jeremiah 27:2, NlrV). That must have been a burdensome work, even under the best of conditions. In this case, it became harder because a false prophet challenged what Jeremiah said. This week we will get a powerful explanation of truth and error. We will study a battle being fought for the hearts and minds of the people. We will study, too, how a message of grace (mercy and forgiveness) can also be a false message.

Jeremiah's work does not get easier. God forbids him to enter into mourning when others mourn. The point was to help the people to understand what was coming because of their sins and to repent (turn away from sin) and to obey. This would lessen the terrible results of their sinful actions.

DEFINITIONS

1. yoke—a bar or frame that is attached to the heads or necks of two work animals (such as oxen) so that they can pull a plow or heavy load.

A LONELY LIFE (Jeremiah 16:1–13)

No question, Jeremiah's life was not an easy one. (He would be the first to admit it, too!) But things were even harder than we might have imagined.

Read Jeremiah 16:1–13. What was the Lord's message to Jeremiah here? However rough and hard, in what ways would it have been a blessing to the prophet? Read also Hosea 1:1–3.

Hosea was to marry a prostitute² in order to explain just how sinful the relationship had become between the Lord and Israel. Israel was guilty of spiritual adultery (sex outside marriage). But Jeremiah was to avoid marriage and to not have children altogether. This was something rather rare for that time and culture. In Israel, starting a family was very important for every young man. Besides the love and companionship between spouses (husbands or wives), it was also important to carry on the family name. Why did God forbid Jeremiah from starting a family? It was because his own life would be an example of how terrible that time would be when families broke up and when they suffered from the pain of separation. Jeremiah's lack of family life was a continuing warning and lesson for the people living during his time.

Jeremiah could not do other things, as well. God told him not to enter a house where there was mourning. This was meant to symbolize (be a sign of) the people's unwilling attitude (feeling) toward God's calls for repentance (turning away from sin) and revival (new life).

Along with times of mourning, Jeremiah was not to join their festivals of joy and celebration. This was to symbolize the coming time when the Babylonians would bring an end to all of their joy and rejoicing.

Jeremiah could not enjoy the human bonds that united (joined together) others, whether in mourning or joy. His life and the sorrows of his life were to be lessons from real life. If only the nation would learn from them!

How should this story help us learn to appreciate the human support that we enjoy getting from each other, and that we give to others? This support is important, but how can we learn that our best support comes only from the Lord?



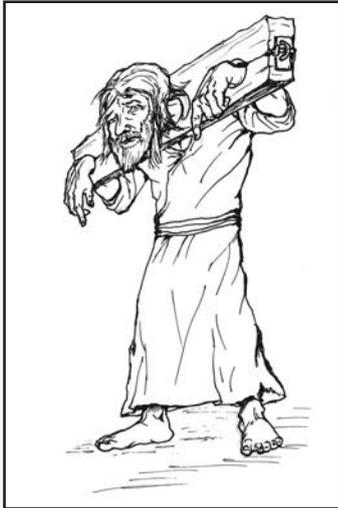
Hosea's marriage to a prostitute was meant to show just how sinful the relationship had become between the Lord and His people.

DEFINITIONS

2. prostitute—a person who offers sex for money.

JEREMIAH'S YOKE (Jeremiah 27:1–18)

Read Jeremiah 27:1–18. What is the message of the Lord to the people? Why would this seem to be a bad sign for many who heard it?



The wooden yoke Jeremiah wore was a clear sign that Israel would be made to suffer an embarrassing defeat.

The yoke Jeremiah had to put on his body was a very clear sign that the proud nation would be made to suffer an embarrassing defeat. An enemy army would invade the nation and keep it under its control. (In Deuteronomy 28:48 and 1 Kings 12:4, the idea of a yoke means that the nation will be under the control of the enemy.) Jeremiah had to experience physically what the Babylonian invasion meant. The wooden yoke Jeremiah put on his arms and shoulders was one and a half meters long and eight centimeters thick (about 5 feet by 8 inches). The important part of his message was that if a country rebelled (fought) against Babylon, the Lord would act as if the country had rebelled against Him. Then the rebellious (disobedient) people would suffer as a result.

The Hebrew language is not very clear in these verses (Jeremiah 17:1–18). But it seems that Jeremiah did not have to make a yoke only for himself. It was also for the messengers from foreign countries who had come to Jerusalem and were planning to fight against Nebuchadnezzar. Through Jeremiah, God was warning them not to fight. It is natural to fight against a foreign invader. And this is what these messengers from foreign countries wanted to do. So, Jeremiah's words were not at all welcome.

What is very important about the message in Jeremiah 27:5? Read also Daniel 4:25.

DEFINITIONS

3. pagan—not believing in God.

Here again, as we find all through both Old and New Testaments, the Lord as Creator is the Ruler over all the earth. There appears to be serious trouble (invasion and control by a pagan² nation). But the power and authority of God is still clear. This would bring hope to all in the faithful remnant (small group).

It is one thing to be under a yoke of slavery. But ask yourself: Have you put someone else under an unfair yoke? If so, why not remove it now?

WAR OF THE PROPHETS (Jeremiah 28:1–9)

Bad news is bad news. Often we do not want to get it. Or we want to make excuses for it. Such was the case here in Judah with Jeremiah and the yoke that he carried. It was an unmistakable message of warning to the people. “The council of nations was very surprised when Jeremiah carried the yoke on his neck and made known to them the will of God.” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 444.

Read Jeremiah 28:1–9. Imagine you are a Judean (a person of the tribe of Judah) standing there and watching all this going on. Whom would you believe? Whom would you *want* to believe? What reason would you have, if any, for believing Hananiah rather than Jeremiah?

Jeremiah raised his voice in the name of God. And Hananiah spoke in the name of God too. But who was speaking for God? They both could not be! For us today, the answer is clear. For someone at that time, it might have been more difficult, even though Jeremiah does make a powerful point in verses 8, 9: the prophets in the past have preached the same message that I am, that of judgment and doom.

“Before the priests and people, Jeremiah begged them to surrender to the king of Babylon for 70 years. Jeremiah directed the attention of the men of Judah to the prophecies [special messages from God] of Hosea, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and others. Their messages of warning had been very much like his own. Jeremiah reminded the people of events that had taken place in fulfillment of prophecies that warned of coming punishment for unrepented [feeling no sorrow over] sin. In the past the judgments of God had been given to unrepentant [not turning away from sin] people in exact fulfillment of His purpose as shown through His messengers.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 445.

In short, just as we today are to learn lessons from Bible history, Jeremiah was trying to get the people in his time to do the same thing: learn from the past so you do not make the same mistakes that your forefathers did.

Hananiah’s name means “God has been gracious [merciful and forgiving].” His name seemed to be presenting a message of grace, of forgiveness, of salvation. What lessons should we learn from this false prophet of grace?

THE YOKE OF IRON (Jeremiah 28:12–14)



Hananiah's breaking the yoke around Jeremiah's neck was an open act of rebellion (war) against God.

The battle between the prophets was not just one of words but of action, too. In obedience to the command of God, Jeremiah put the wooden yoke around his neck. This was a clear symbol of the message that he had carried to the people.

What symbol did the false prophet Hananiah use to try to prove he was acting out God's will? Read Jeremiah 28:1–11.

Remember the story about Jesus cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:13, 19–21)? Suppose someone had heard what Jesus said and knew what had happened. And he decided to plant a new fig tree in the same spot. Such a person would be trying to prove wrong the prophecy (special message) of Jesus. This is exactly what Hananiah did to Jeremiah. This is what the yoke around his neck symbolized. It was an act of open rebellion (war) against what Jeremiah said.

Note, too, Jeremiah's feeling. The verses tell nothing of what he said right after the yoke was broken. He just turned around and walked away. If the story had ended there, it would have seemed that the prophet had walked away in defeat.

Read Jeremiah 28:12–14. What happened next? What was Jeremiah's new message?

Jeremiah's answer was not a message of revenge: you did this to me, so I will do that to you. Instead, it was another clear message from the Lord. But it was even stronger than what came before. Hananiah had broken the wooden yoke, but who can break an iron one? God's judgment could not be changed. If anything, it would just become worse because of the people's stubbornness to obey. If you thought a wooden yoke was bad, try an iron one.

Who has not learned the hard way about making things more difficult for ourselves by being stubborn? When dealing with the Lord, why is it always better to surrender right away than to keep on fighting and making things harder on yourself?

TRUSTING IN LIES (Jeremiah 28:15)

“ ‘Listen, Hananiah! The LORD hasn’t [has not] sent you. But you have tricked these people. Now they trust in lies’ ” (Jeremiah 28:15, NlrV).

The answer came soon about who was right: Jeremiah or Hananiah. Jeremiah 28:16, 17 tells what happened to the false prophet. It was just what Jeremiah had said would happen.

Hananiah died, but he still had done damage to the nation. In a way, his works followed him. He made the people “to trust in a lie.” The Hebrew verb is *hiphil*, a verb meaning “to trust.” By lying, Hananiah caused them to trust in a lie. The Lord had not sent him, but he spoke in the name of the Lord. The Lord’s name meant a lot to the people of Judah. It had a lot of power. Added to that, Hananiah’s message of “grace,” “deliverance [freedom],” and “redemption [salvation]” was certainly something that the people wanted to believe. This is because of the great threat that came from the nation of Babylon. Hananiah’s message, though, was a false “gospel,” a false message of salvation that the Lord had not given him. So, at a time when the people needed to follow the words of Jeremiah and the message of warning that he brought, they followed the words of Hananiah instead. And this made their troubles only worse.

What do 2 Timothy 4:3, 4 and 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12 have in common with Jeremiah 28:15?

Things are no different today. We are in the great controversy (war), a battle for the hearts and minds of the world’s billions of people. Satan is working very hard to get as many as possible to “trust in a lie.” And that lie can come in many forms. But it is always a lie. After all, because Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), Satan’s lies can be about anything and everything. But the one thing they do not have is the truth found in Jesus.

What are some of the lies that are so strong in your culture today? Why is holding on to Jesus, and His Word, our only protection against them?



We are in the great battle for the hearts and minds of the world’s billions of people.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: As we have found, people want to believe good news, not bad. For example, they wanted to believe in Hananiah’s message, not Jeremiah’s. Today the same thing happens too. Many still believe and preach that our world will only improve over time. But even an atheist⁴ such as Terry Eagleton understands just how foolish that idea is: “People believe too quickly that we are all steadily on our way to a finer [better] world. This weak idea is a carryover from the past. But today people are filled with doubts and negative thoughts about the world’s future.”—Adapted from *Reason, Faith, and Revolution [Change]: Reflections on the God Debate [Argument]* (Yale University Press, 2010), Kindle edition, page 70. Some aspects of life have improved, but our world, in and of itself, offers us little hope, little comfort in the long run. If we are to have any real hope, it has to be from God and not from the world. It also has to be something supernatural (of God), not natural. That is what the gospel is all about: God’s actions in our world and our lives. Without that, what do we have? Nothing more than just more Hananiahs and their lies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Think about our earth’s future as a whole. Does it look hopeful and full of promise, or does it look fearful, dangerous, and full of uncertainty? What reasons can you give for your answers?
- ② Jeremiah’s message was to study the past, to study history, and to learn from it. Ellen G. White’s message was like Jeremiah’s: “We have nothing to fear for the future if we remember the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”—Adapted from *Life Sketches*, page 196. What does she mean by that? What has happened in our past, and God’s teaching in it, that can help us be prepared for what will be sure to come in the future?
- ③ Hananiah gave a false message of grace. What are some of those false messages of grace today that we must guard ourselves against? Grace is our only hope, but in what false ways can it be taught as a lie?

DEFINITIONS

4. atheist—someone who does not believe there is a God.