

Back to Egypt



SABBATH—DECEMBER 12

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Jeremiah 40:7–16; Jeremiah 41–43; Exodus 16:3; Numbers 16:13; Jeremiah 44.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘We’ll [we will] do everything the Lord your God sends you to tell us to do. If we don’t [do not], may he be a true and faithful witness against us’ ” (Jeremiah 42:5, NIrV).

THIS WEEK'S LESSON BRINGS US TOWARD THE END OF THE STORY OF JEREMIAH THE PROPHET (SPECIAL MESSENGER). But this is not a “they lived happily ever after” ending. In a sense, one could summarize this week’s lesson on the book of Jeremiah by saying that what we find is an example of the limits of grace (forgiveness and mercy). That is, grace will not save those who refuse to accept it. It does not matter how much the Lord spoke to them. God offered them salvation, protection, peace, and success. But all of them, except a small group of faithful people, refused to accept God’s offer of salvation.

And what of Jeremiah? His was a life and work that seemed useless! The “weeping [crying] prophet” had plenty to weep (cry) about. Everything Jeremiah warned about came to pass. But the people still held on to their sins, idol worship, and rebellion (war against God). They openly rebelled (fought) against the prophet and against the word (message) of the Lord.

How we need to be careful ourselves. Grace is grace because it is given to all sinners. But it is not forced on anyone. We must be willing to accept it.

POLITICAL ANARCHY¹ (Jeremiah 40:7–16)

One would think that with the destruction of Jerusalem and the total defeat by the Babylonians that all the people would have learned their lesson. Sadly, not all did. And the story was not over yet.

Read Jeremiah 40:7–16. What message was given again to the people? What important meaning does the word *remnant* (small group) have in verse 11?

A message of peace was given. And there even was some success (read Jeremiah 40:12). But not everyone was satisfied with the present situation.

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

The reasons for the assassination (murder of a famous or important person) were not given. But it had been done by someone of the “royal family and of the officers of the king” (Jeremiah 41:1, NKJV). This suggests that these royal officers still had not accepted the idea that the chosen nation needed to surrender to Babylonian rule. Because Gedaliah had been put on the throne by the king of Babylon (read Jeremiah 40:5), these people might have seen him as a false king who was not loyal to the nation. So, they felt that Gedaliah had to be killed along with his court.

As the chapter continues, we can learn that this remnant now faced a new threat: fear of the Babylonians. Not knowing all the reasons for what happened, the Babylonians would want revenge for the death of Gedaliah and the Babylonian soldiers (read Jeremiah 41:3).

DEFINITIONS

1. political anarchy—a situation of confusion and wild behavior in which the people in a country, group, or organization are not controlled by rules or laws.

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 we can bring pain and suffering to innocent people by disobeying God?

LOOKING FOR GOD'S LEADING (Jeremiah 42)

Read Jeremiah 42. What powerful message is found there for the people and for anyone who depends on the Lord's leading through prayer?

Fearful of the Babylonians, the people go to Jeremiah and ask him to pray for God's leading. They must have known by now that Jeremiah was really a prophet of God. They also must have known that what Jeremiah said would come true when he spoke in the name of the Lord.

The people also promised they would do whatever God asked or commanded them to do. So, as we read, we find a people who seem to have learned their lesson. They are the ones who want to know what God's will is and to follow it. Their words were a powerful confession of faith: "It doesn't [does not] matter whether what you say is in our favor or not. We're [we are] asking you to pray to the **LORD** our God. And we'll [we will] obey him. Things will go well with us. That's [That is] because we will obey the **LORD** our God" (Jeremiah 42:6, NIrV).

Compare² the words here with Jeremiah's earlier messages: do not trust in foreign powers. Trust in the Lord, and He will make you successful. He will save you when the time is right. Salvation is not from anywhere or anyone else. The foreign powers did not help you before. They will not help you now.

God has to warn them because He knows the weakness of their hearts. He knows that they are thinking of going back to Egypt for their protection. So, the Lord gave them very clear commands not to do that. Doing that would ruin them.

Again, such a very clear choice! This is the choice we all have to face: (1) life and peace through faith and obedience to Jesus or (2) misery and death through lack of faith and obedience. In the end, the issue is the same for all of us. Unlike these people of Israel, we do not always have the warnings given to us so clearly. 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?

DEFINITIONS

2. compare—show how two or more things are the same or different.

RETURNING TO EGYPT (Jeremiah 43:1–7)

If you have not read ahead, Jeremiah 42 could be very exciting. What will the people do? Would they reach out in faith, a faith that is found in obedience, and remain in Judah? Or would they make the same mistakes that were made in the past? And instead of following the Lord, would they do what they wanted to do? The Lord had already given them a 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?

Suppose God's Word does not agree with our desires. Then we may have doubts about His plans. Likewise, the people and the leaders had doubts about Jeremiah. In Israel, the situation had changed, but the people remained the same in their thinking and in their heart. They excused themselves from their promise by attacking the prophet Jeremiah. But they did not want to attack the aged Jeremiah directly. So, they blamed Baruch, his friend and sometimes scribe. And they turned their anger against him. They claimed that Baruch had turned the prophet against them.

Read Exodus 16:3 and Numbers 16:13. What are the comparisons between what the people said to Jeremiah and what the people in Moses' time said to him?

Human nature is always searching for someone else to blame for its problems. It is always searching for an excuse to do what it wants. So, Baruch was blamed as wanting all of his countrymen to die by the hand of the Babylonians or to be taken to Babylon. Jeremiah 43:1–7 does not say why the people thought Baruch wanted this to happen. Neither does the Bible explain why the people of Israel thought Moses wanted them to die in the wilderness after they had left Egypt. People at the peak of emotions (strong feelings) may not have good reasons for their thinking. How important it is that we keep our emotions under the Lord's control!

How often do we let emotions influence our judgment or even ignore a clear command of the Lord? How can we protect ourselves from letting emotions control us? Read 2 Corinthians 10:5.



The people turned against Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah.

TAKEN TO EGYPT (Jeremiah 43:8–13)

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

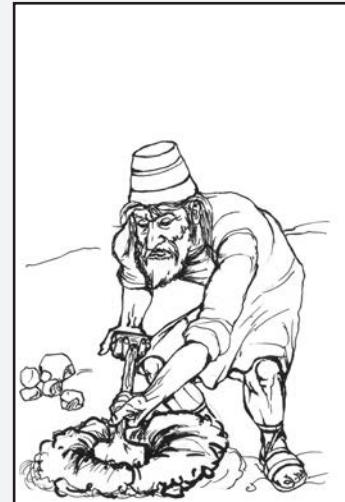
Tahpanhes was a town at the northeastern border of Egypt. The town also was a strong fort where many Jewish colonists lived.

Here again, the Lord wanted Jeremiah to act out a prophecy (special message from God). Even though words are powerful, the point comes through even more strongly when the words are acted out before us.

How exactly Jeremiah was to bury stones at the entrance to Pharaoh's house, we do not know. But the point was clear: even the mighty pharaohs were no match for the Lord. The Lord would fulfill His word just as He had said. The Israelites thought that they would find protection and safety by going to Egypt. But they were as wrong as those who thought that they could find protection and safety by having Egypt come to them (Jeremiah 37:7, 8). The Egyptian gods were useless. These gods were pagan idols that kept the people ignorant about truth. The Israelites should have known, as we should know now, that our only true protection and safety is in obeying the Lord.

"When self-denial³ becomes a part of our religion, we shall understand and do the will [plan for our lives] of God. Then our eyes will be anointed [touched] with eye-salve [ointment] so that we shall see wonderful things out of His law. We shall see the path of obedience as the only path of safety. God holds His people responsible for as much of the truth as they understand. The claims of His law are just and reasonable. Through the grace of Christ He expects us to fulfill His requirements."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 25, 1890.

Think about the symbol of the Israelites' going back to Egypt in their desire to find safety. How strange! In a spiritual sense, what are ways that we could be tempted (filled with desire) to "go back to Egypt" to find what we think we cannot find with the Lord?



God asks Jeremiah to bury stones at the entrance to Pharaoh's house to show His people that trusting in Egypt and its gods is useless.

DEFINITIONS

3. self-denial—the act of not allowing yourself to have or do something you want.

OPEN REBELLION (Jeremiah 44:1–10)

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

While in Egypt, Jeremiah had to face the same problem he had while he and his people had lived in Judah. At that time Jeremiah had to talk to the leaders. Then he had to talk to the common people, who in Egypt were doing some of the same sins that had brought trouble to them before.

What surprising answer did the people give to Jeremiah? Read Jeremiah 44:15–19.

The continuing hardness of their hearts is surprising. They looked Jeremiah in the face and refused to accept what he spoke to them in “the name of the LORD.”

The reason was simple: in the early days, before the reforms of Josiah, they were very much involved in worshiping pagan gods. They even burned incense to the “queen of heaven” and poured out drink offerings to her. Things seemed to go well for them. They had a comfortable life and lived in safety. But it was only *after* the reforms (changes) of Josiah that problems started. So, why should they listen to Jeremiah and all his warnings?

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

There are those who are deeply involved in sin and unbelief but seem to be doing very well. Meanwhile, at times faithful Christians go through terrible hardships. How do we explain and work our way through this problem?



The people’s minds were so confused that they believed that all their successes were from burning incense to the “queen of heaven.”

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: All through the book of Jeremiah, as through all the Bible, we are wrestling with the question of good and evil. And as Christians we know good from evil, because God has explained the difference to us in many different ways. (Read, for example, Romans 7:7; Micah 6:8; Joshua 24:15; Matthew 22:37–39; and Deuteronomy 12:8.) But what if you do not believe in God? How can you know good from evil? Well, atheist⁴ author Sam Harris has a suggestion. He wrote a book called *The Moral Landscape*. In this book he argues that good and evil can and should be understood only through science. That is, science should help us know right from wrong and good from evil. Sam even guesses 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 change in the human brain can be made cheaply, painlessly, and safely. The cure for psychopathy⁶ can be put directly into the food supply like vitamin D. Evil is now nothing more than a food problem.”—Adapted from *The Moral Landscape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), Kindle edition, page 109. But most scientists, even those who do not believe in God, would have a problem believing that science can solve these problems. If, however, you do not believe in God, where else can you find the answers for these problems?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① “With us, everything depends on how we accept the Lord’s conditions [rules].”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, page 118. Why is it a mistake to think that salvation comes with no conditions (rules)? Conditions are not the same things as works. They do not help us earn points with God. How can we learn to tell the difference between the false teaching of salvation by works (legalism) and the false teaching that salvation has no conditions (cheap grace)?

- ② Think more deeply about the difficult question at the end of Thursday’s study. If someone says, “I do not believe in Jesus. I do not even believe in God, and 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 answer?



“All through the book of Jeremiah we are wrestling with the question of good and evil.”

DEFINITIONS

4. atheist—a person who does not believe in God.

5. moral—having to do with knowing right from wrong.

6. psychopathy—mental disorder or illness in which a person does not care about other people and is usually dangerous or violent.