

Rebuke *and* Retribution



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 17:5–10, Jer. 17:1–4, John 3:19, Jer. 11:18–23, Jer. 12:1–6, 14:1–16.*

Memory Text: “Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for You are my praise” (*Jeremiah 17:14, NKJV*).

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (*Eccles. 1:9, ESV*).

Nothing new under the sun? This is especially true when it comes to the lives and work of God's prophets, who were often called to deliver words of warning and rebuke to those who should have known better. Though seeking to be faithful to their calling, the prophets for the most part faced fervent opposition, even retribution, often from the spiritual leaders, those who should have been the first to listen to them. No wonder Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets” (*Matt. 23:29, 30*).

This week we'll start to look at the trials of Jeremiah, whose ministry seemed to consist of nothing but rebuke and retribution: he giving the rebuke, the leaders giving him retribution.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 24.*

The Two Ways

From the earliest chapters of Genesis to the last chapters of Revelation, the Bible presents to us only two options on how to live: we either follow the Lord with all our heart and soul, or we don't. As Jesus said, in words that many have found troubling, "He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth" (*Luke 11:23*). This is a powerfully unambiguous statement about spiritual realities greater than what appears to the naked eye or than what common sense would seem to tell us. It's the great controversy theme at its most basic level. And yet, in one sense, Jesus isn't saying anything new or radical. It's always been this way.

Read Jeremiah 17:5–10. What crucial spiritual principles do we find here, especially in light of the great controversy between Christ and Satan?

The immediate context of these words probably reflects Judah's political dalliances, and the Lord wanted them to understand that their only help was in God, not in political or military powers, a point that they would later learn but only after it was far too late. Though the Lord can and does use other people to help us, in the end we must always put our trust only in Him. We can never know for sure the motives of others; we can always know God's intentions for us.

With good reason, Jeremiah 17:9 warns about the deceitfulness of the human heart. The Hebrew text says that the heart is more deceitful than "everything." The horrific physical effects of sin, as bad as they are, aren't as bad as the moral and spiritual effects. The problem is, because our hearts are already so deceitful, we can't fully know just how bad they really are. Jeremiah was soon to see for himself how very bad human intentions 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

Certainly, Jeremiah's task was not going to be easy. Maybe some people might find perverse pleasure in pointing out people's sins, but most would find it to be very unappealing work, especially because of the reactions their words would provoke. Though some, when they hear the words of rebuke, might repent and reform, that's usually not the case, especially when the rebuke itself is very pointed and strong. And indeed, as with all of the prophets, the words of Jeremiah were just that: pointed and strong!

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

The imagery of the sin engraved on the heart is especially powerful. It shows the depth of the corruption. The idea isn't just that the sin is written there, as with a pen, but that it is *engraved* there, etched in with a tool. This all becomes even more powerful when one remembers the words of the Lord to Judah's ancestors: "If you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Deut. 30:10, NIV; compare with Ps. 40:8 and Jer. 31:33*). It was out of their hearts that they were to love God and obey His law; now, instead, their sin—the violation of that law (*1 John 3:4*)—is etched in their hearts.

"Let none who claim to be the depositaries of God's law flatter themselves that the regard they may outwardly show toward the commandments will preserve them from the exercise of divine justice. Let none refuse to be reprov'd for evil, nor charge the servants of God with being too zealous in endeavoring to cleanse the camp from evil-doing. A sin-hating God calls upon those who claim to keep His law to depart from all iniquity."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 416.

Sin engraved on the heart? That's a scary thought, is it not? What does that image say about just how deep and intense the work of purifying our hearts is? What's the only way to accomplish it?

The Warning to Jeremiah

“And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

The sad story of Jeremiah is that the opposition he faced came from the very ones whom, through him, the Lord was trying to save. The Lord wanted to spare them the disaster that was sure to come. The problem, though, is that people often don't want to hear what they need to hear, because it cuts against their sinful and corrupt desires.

Read Jeremiah 11:18–23. What is going on here? What does some of the imagery remind us of?

Though in ancient Israel those who falsely prophesied in the name of the Lord could face death, in this case there was no indication that the men of Anathoth thought Jeremiah was speaking falsely. Instead, it seemed that they just wanted him silenced. They didn't want to hear what he had to say. Though the text doesn't say how they planned to kill him, some scholars have thought that they might have been thinking of poisoning him.

As we saw, too, Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown, and its people were rejecting his message, even to the point of being willing to kill him. This, though, was only the beginning of a much wider rejection by all but a "remnant" of his own nation.

Of course, all of this, including the "lamb led to the slaughter" imagery, evokes the sacrifice of Jesus. In a sense, Jeremiah prefigured Christ, not as a type (like the animal sacrifices), but in that he, like Jesus, faced powerful opposition from the very ones he was trying to help. This situation in Jeremiah's life definitely calls to mind what Jesus went through early in His ministry as well (*Luke 4:14–30*).

When was the last time you heard something that you knew was right, but you simply didn't want to hear it? What was your initial reaction? In cases like this, why must we learn to take up our cross?

A Lament

In the earliest chapters of Jeremiah, the Lord had warned his servant that his work as a prophet was not going to be easy. At the time of his calling, Jeremiah was told that Judah's princes, kings, priests, and people would "fight against [him]" (*Jer. 1:19*). Although he was told that the Lord would sustain him and that his opponents would not "prevail against [him]" (*Jer. 1:19*), no doubt the warning that most of his own people were going to fight him wasn't welcome news. Jeremiah, though, didn't yet know the half of it, and when trials came, he was understandably angry and hurt.

What universal issue is the prophet struggling with in Jeremiah 12:1–4? What is the prophet's attitude toward those who have hurt him? What does this tell us about the humanity of even God's most faithful servants?

Jeremiah 12:1 is filled with Old Testament legal language: the Hebrew words for "righteous," "bring a case," and "justice" (*NIV*) all appear in legal settings. The prophet, so upset over what he has been facing, is bringing a "lawsuit" (*see Deut. 25:1*) against the Lord. His complaint, of course, is a common one: why do evil people always seem to prosper?

We can see, too, Jeremiah's humanity exhibited. He wants those who have done evil to him to be punished. He's not speaking here as a theologian; he's speaking as a fallen human being in need of grace who, like Job and like many of God's faithful people, doesn't understand why these things are happening to him. Why should Jeremiah, God's servant, called to declare God's truth to a rebellious people, be subjected to the treacherous plots of his own village? Jeremiah trusted in the Lord, but he surely didn't understand why things were happening as they were.

How can we learn to trust in the Lord despite all the things that happen that just don't seem to make sense to us?

A Desperate Situation

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

Drought struck all of the land; every city, town, and village suffered. The poor and the rich suffered together. Not even the wildlife could bear the lack of water. The aristocrats waited for their servants at the city gates, hoping they had found water, but the springs had dried up. There was no water, and without water, life could not continue. Their misery grew from day to day. The people put on mourning clothes, and walked with their eyes downcast. Then they would suddenly kneel and cry out in desperate prayer.

At the time of such a natural catastrophe, it was the custom to visit the temple of Jerusalem (*Joel 1:13, 14; 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 didn't seek the Lord, only the water. This saddened the prophet further. Jeremiah was also praying, not for water but for the mercy and presence of God.

Jeremiah understood, too, that this was only the beginning of the trials to come. God saw the hearts of the people and knew that if He were to remove the drought, then the repentance 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, true repentance. They were looking only to remove the results of the problem, not the problem itself, which was their sin and disobedience.

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

“Do not pray for this people, for their good,” God told Jeremiah, even though Jeremiah presented earlier a great example of intercessory prayer: “O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do it for Your name’s sake” (*Jer. 14:7, NKJV*). Though we are told to “pray without ceasing” (*1 Thess. 5:17*), in this case the Lord, who knows everything from beginning to end, is revealing to Jeremiah just how corrupt and fallen these people are. Of course, God knows people’s hearts, and God knows the future; we don’t. Hence, the New Testament admonition to pray, even for our enemies, doesn’t lose any of its force here.

Further Thought: Jeremiah struggled with a question that we all do: How do we make sense of evil? But maybe that's the problem, trying to make sense of what's not sensible, what could even be deemed as "nonsense."

In this regard, Ellen G. White wrote: "It is impossible to explain the origin of sin so as to give a reason for its existence. . . . Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 492, 493. Replace the word *sin* with *evil* and the statement works just as well: *It is impossible to explain the origin of evil so as to give a reason for its existence. . . . Evil is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be evil.*

When tragedy strikes, we hear people say, or we ourselves think: *I don't understand this. It doesn't make sense.* Well, there's a good reason that we don't understand it: it's not understandable. If we could understand it, if it made sense, if it fit into some logical and rational plan, then it wouldn't be that evil; it wouldn't be that tragic because it serves a rational purpose. How crucial it is that we remember that evil, like sin, cannot often be explained. What we do have, however, is the reality of the Cross, which shows us the love and goodness of God despite the inexplicable evil caused by sin.

Discussion Question:

❶ Dwell more on this idea that evil and suffering don't make sense, that they don't have a rational or good explanation. Why is it better that way? Think about it. A horrible tragedy strikes: perhaps a young child dies of a terrible disease after years of suffering. Do we really want to believe that a good and rational reason exists for this? Isn't it better to chalk it up to the terrible and evil results of living in a fallen world? Discuss in class.

Nothing but Faith: Part 1

John grew up knowing that God was calling him to become a minister. When he tried to ignore or avoid the call, he found that he could not.

In Zimbabwe, work for students is nearly impossible to find; so, John had to rely on his mother's income when he enrolled at Solusi University, a Seventh-day Adventist university in Zimbabwe.

During school breaks, John held short evangelistic meetings in several churches and rejoiced to see 100 people come to Christ.

But when he returned home he learned that his mother's goods weren't selling, and there wasn't enough money for his tuition. "Perhaps you'll have to wait a semester to go back to school," she suggested to John.

"Don't worry," John told her. "God is the one who called me to the ministry, and He will help with my school fees."

John packed his bag, kissed his mother good-bye, and got on the bus to Solusi, arriving with not enough money to buy a bus ticket back home. He had nothing but his faith.

Because he arrived at Solusi too late to register, John stayed in a friend's dormitory room that night. The next day he went to see the dean of men to be assigned a dorm room. The dean was reluctant to give him a room without financial clearance. But he knew John, and finally he agreed. "Here's your key," the dean said. "But if you haven't received financial clearance by 5:00 P.M. tomorrow, you'll have to move out."

John thanked him and put his things into the room. Before unpacking, he knelt down and prayed. "God, thank You for the time that I have this room. If You don't pay my fees, I'll have to move out tomorrow; so, it's up to You. Thanks, Lord. Amen."

John had heard that an evangelist friend of his, Sister Jeremiah, was holding meetings on campus. He went to visit her. "Did you pay your fees?" Sister Jeremiah asked him.

"No," he said honestly. "My mom doesn't have the money. I've come so we can pray about it."

"Let's not ask God for the money," Sister Jeremiah said. "Let's just thank Him for providing the money you need." So, the two knelt down, and Sister Jeremiah thanked God for the money John hadn't yet received.

The money didn't come that day. As John walked around campus, several friends stopped to ask how things were going. John didn't tell them about his financial needs but replied, smiling, "Everything is fine; God is in control."

One girl on campus knew John's situation. When she encouraged him to drop out of school, he replied, "Don't try to discourage me. God *will* provide."

But by bedtime that night, nothing had happened. John again placed his situation in God's hands then went to sleep.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.