

The Crisis (Within and Without)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Judg. 2:1–15; 1 Kings 12:26–31; 2 Chron. 33:9, 10; Jer. 2:1–28; 5:2, 3.*

Memory Text: “‘Israel was holiness to the LORD, the firstfruits of His increase. All that devour him will offend; disaster will come upon them,’ says the LORD” (*Jeremiah 2:3, NKJV*).

If we could pick one word to describe the human condition since the Fall, it would be *crisis*, the extent of which can be best understood by what it took to get us out of the crisis: the death of Jesus on the cross. The crisis must be pretty bad; after all, look at the extreme measures needed to solve it.

All through the Bible, many stories took place against the backdrop of one crisis or another. The situation during the time of Jeremiah and his ministry was no different.

God's people faced many challenges, both from within and from without. Unfortunately, despite the terrible military threat from foreign powers, in many ways the greatest crisis came from within. “Within” meant not just a corrupt leadership and corrupt priesthood, which were bad enough, but “within” was in the sense of people whose hearts had been so hardened and damaged by sin and apostasy that they refused to heed the warnings that God was sending them, warnings that could have spared them from disaster.

Sin is bad enough, but when you refuse to turn away from it—talk about a crisis!

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 10.

A Quick History

When the Israelites had finally entered the Promised Land, after years of wandering in the wilderness, it wasn't long before troubles began. All it took was for a new generation to arise, one that didn't "know the LORD" (*Judg. 2:10*), and a spiritual crisis started that, in many ways, infected the nation all through its history. It's a problem that, indeed, has infected the Christian church as well.

Read Judges 2:1–15. What caused the crisis, and how was it made manifest?

Verse 11 says: "Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (*NIV*). Each generation, one after the other, moved one step farther from God until the nation was doing exactly what the Lord had told it not to do. Due to their sin, the Israelites faced one crisis after another, but even then the Lord had not given up on them. He sent them judges (*Judg. 2:16*) who delivered them from their immediate woes.

After the era of the judges, the nation entered a time of relative peace and prosperity under what has been called "the United Monarchy," the rule of Saul, David, and Solomon, which lasted about one hundred years. Under David, then Solomon, it grew into a regional power.

The "good" times, though, did not last. After the death of Solomon (about 931 B.C.), the nation split into two factions, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Much of the blame can be placed on the misguided rule of Solomon, who, for all his wisdom, made numerous mistakes. "The tribes had long suffered grievous wrongs under the oppressive measures of their former ruler. The extravagance of Solomon's reign during his apostasy had led him to tax the people heavily and to require of them much menial service."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 88, 89. Things were never the same again for God's chosen nation. Everything the Lord had warned them not to do, they did, and thus, they reaped the doleful consequences.

Think about the problem of the next generation not having the values and beliefs of the one before it. How have we, as a church, dealt with this issue? How can we learn to transmit our values to those who follow us?

The Two Kingdoms

After the division of the nation, things went from bad to worse. In the Northern Kingdom, King Jeroboam made some terrible spiritual choices that had a long-lasting impact for evil.

Read 1 Kings 12:26–31. What should this tell us about how immediate circumstances can so blind our judgment?

The king's introduction of idolatrous worship helped set the nation on a disastrous course. "The apostasy introduced during Jeroboam's reign became more and more marked, until finally it resulted in the utter ruin of the kingdom of Israel."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 107. In 722 B.C., Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, put an end to the country and deported its inhabitants to different parts of his empire (see *2 Kings 17:1–7*). There was no turning back from this exile. For a time, Israel disappeared from history.

Things weren't as bad in the Southern Kingdom, at least not yet. But they weren't great either, and, as with the Northern Kingdom, the Lord sought to spare these people from the calamity that the Northern Kingdom faced, only now from the threat of the Babylonians. Unfortunately, with rare exceptions, Judah had a series of kings who continued to lead the nation into deeper apostasy.

What do these verses say about the reign of some of Judah's kings?
2 Chron. 33:9, 10, 21–23; 2 Kings 24:8, 9, 18, 19.

Despite all the terrible leadership, so many of the prophetic books of the Bible, including Jeremiah, are the words of the prophets whom God sent to His people in an attempt to turn them away from the sin and apostasy that was eating at the heart of the nation. The Lord was not going to give up on His people without giving them ample time and opportunity to turn from their evil ways and be spared the disaster that their sin would, inevitably, bring.

It's so hard to step out of your own culture and environment and look at yourself objectively. In fact, it's impossible. Why, then, must we constantly test our lives against the standard of the Bible? What other standard do we have?

Two Evils

It was against this background that the young Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry. “The word of the LORD” came to him, and he spoke it in hopes that the people, if they would heed these words, would be spared the ruin that otherwise was sure to come.

Read Jeremiah 2:1–28 and answer the following questions:

What promises had God made to the nation when they were faithful? (See vs. 2, 3.)

What were some of the priests, pastors, and prophets doing that was sinful? (See vs. 8.)

In what terrible ways were the people self-deceived in regard to their true spiritual condition? (See vs. 23, 24.)

Even though the nation had experienced some spiritual reform under the leadership of Hezekiah and Josiah, the people reverted to their old ways and fell into worse apostasy. As he did all through his ministry, Jeremiah here spoke in no uncertain terms about what was going on.

Particularly interesting are his words in Jeremiah 2:13. The people had committed two evils: they forsook the Lord, the fountain of living waters, and as a result, hewed out for themselves broken cisterns that, of course, could not hold any water at all. In other words, having abandoned the Lord, they had lost everything. These words become even more meaningful in light of what Jesus said in John 4:10.

In Jeremiah 2:5, the Lord said that the people had gone after “worthlessness,” and as a result they had become “worthless” (ESV). The Hebrew words for both terms come from the same Hebrew word (*hbl*) that is often translated “vanity.” It also means “a vapor” or “breath.” How does going after worthless things make us “worthless”? What does that mean? How does this concept help us to understand those who, at times, feel as if their lives are meaningless or worthless? What is the answer for them?

The Babylonian Threat

The background to the political events that shaped the ministry of Jeremiah are, to some degree, lost to history. That is, many of the details are not available. But we do have in the Bible (with the help of archaeological finds) more than enough information to have a general picture of what took place. Though from a human perspective it probably seemed that no one was in control as these nations battled it out for land, power, and hegemony, the Bible teaches us differently.

Read Jeremiah 27:6. What are we to make of this?

The little kingdom of Judah had, in the early years of Jeremiah's ministry, found itself caught up in the military battles between Babylon, Egypt, and the waning power of Assyria. With the decline of the Assyrian Empire in the late seventh century B.C., Egypt sought to regain power and dominance in the region. However, at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., Egypt was crushed and Babylon became the new world power.

This new power made Judah its vassal state. Jehoiakim, king of Judah, could stabilize the country only by swearing allegiance to the Babylonian king. Many in the country, however, didn't want to be loyal to Babylon; they wanted to fight and free themselves from the Babylonians, even though that wasn't what the Lord intended for them to do. On the contrary, God was using Babylon specifically as a vehicle to punish the nation for its apostasy.

Read Jeremiah 25:8–12. What was Jeremiah's message to the people of Judah?

Again and again, Jeremiah warned the people about what would happen because of their sin, and time and again many of the political and religious leaders refused to heed the warnings, believing instead what they wanted to believe, which is that the Lord would spare them. After all, were they not God's specially called people?

When was the last time you believed what you wanted to believe, no matter how obviously wrong that belief turned out to be? What lessons have you learned so that the same thing doesn't happen again?

Swearing Falsely

In Jeremiah 5:1, the Lord tells the people to run through the streets and see “if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her [Jerusalem]” (*ESV*). This brings to mind two stories. One is from an ancient Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C. named Diogenes, who, according to legend, used to walk around in the marketplace in the daytime, claiming that he was looking for an honest man. The other story, of course, one that we know is true, is that of God speaking to Abraham, telling him that if He could find 50 righteous men (soon reduced to 10), He would not destroy the city.

The point, though, in the Lord’s words through Jeremiah, was to reveal just how widespread the apostasy and sin had become among His people. Was there no one who did justice and sought truth?

Read Jeremiah 5:2, 3. What is being said here that shows just how bad things were becoming? (*See Lev. 19:12.*)

These verses bring up a point that appears all through the book. No matter how deeply fallen the nation had become, many of the people believed that they were still faithfully following the Lord! They were uttering His name, but they were doing it “falsely” instead of “in truth, in justice, and in righteousness” (*Jer. 4:2, ESV*) as the Lord had commanded them. They did not listen to the warning coming from God, but they went on in their lives and religious practices as if everything were all right between them and God, when in fact almost nothing was right between them.

The depth of their deception can be seen in Jeremiah 7:4 when the people would take a false comfort in these words, *hekhah yhwh hekhah yhwh hekhah yhwh hemma!* (“This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD”), as if having the temple there was all that they needed in order to ensure that all would go well with them. It’s one thing to know you’re in a crisis; but when you are in one and don’t know it, that’s an even worse situation.

With all the wonderful truth we have been given as Seventh-day Adventists, how can we make sure we don’t fall into a similar deception of believing our unique calling itself is enough to save us?

Further Thought: “Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes” (*Deut. 12:8*). “When thou shalt hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, to keep all his commandments which I command thee this day, to do that which is right in the eyes of the LORD thy God” (*Deut. 13:18*). “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (*Judg. 17:6, 21:25*).

There’s a crucially important contrast presented in these verses, especially in this day and age when many people revolt against the idea of being told by an outside authority what to do, or being told what is right and wrong. Yet, we can see here a clear distinction between these two worldviews. In one, people do whatever they think is “right” in their own eyes; in another, people are to do what is right in the “eyes of the LORD thy God.” The problem with the first position is that, so often in history, what is “right” in someone’s own eyes is often wrong in God’s. That’s why we have to submit everything, even our own conscience, to the Word of God.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are some examples you can think of where “good” people did very bad things, even though they thought at the time that what they were doing was right? Many cultures today look back in horror at what were once common practices. What lessons can we draw from this for ourselves today about why we not only need to submit to the teaching of the Bible, but also need to be very careful in how we interpret the Bible? This is especially important when we realize that, in some cases, some of the “bad” things that were done were done by those who believed they could justify their actions by the Bible. What should this tell us about how basic and foundational to all our beliefs the Ten Commandments need to be?
- 2 As we study Jeremiah this quarter, keep in mind the idea that despite warning after warning, the people believed that they were right with God. What could have caused them to be so deceived about their true condition? What message should this have for us as well?

A Most Satisfying Career: Part 2

Some Christian lay workers visited Harry's prison each week to teach prisoners about God. One of the prisoners invited Harry to join them. He went, but his mind was focused on a way to escape from prison. A lay worker gave him a book called *The Great Controversy*. Harry read it, but he was sure that God wouldn't bother with him because of all the crimes he'd committed.

Often at night, some of the prisoners would sing and pray together from their cells. One night the words of their song touched Harry's heart. "I've wandered far away from God, now I'm coming home," they sang. In the darkness, tears fell unchecked from Harry's eyes. Then he began sobbing. The same thing happened again a few nights later. Harry realized that God was calling him to come home, and he couldn't refuse.

Harry hesitated to join any one religious group, for he didn't know which one taught Bible truth. He began studying many religions. He even learned Arabic so he could read the Koran. But no religion seemed to hold the truth.

Then Harry remembered the book that he had received. He pulled it out and began reading it again. As he read *The Great Controversy*, he sensed that this book was teaching the truth.

Harry began meeting with the Seventh-day Adventist Bible class, then he joined their baptismal class and prepared to be baptized. But because of his reputation for escaping, the guards refused to allow Harry to leave for his baptism.

A month later Harry was transferred back to the original prison from which he had escaped. When he entered the prison, the guards greeted him. Some of them had heard that Harry had changed, and they watched to see if it was true. They even bribed other prisoners to spy on him.

Harry rejoiced to learn that Adventists held worship services in this prison too. He joined them and continued studying the Voice of Prophecy lessons he had started several months earlier. Finally, he was allowed to be baptized.

Harry wrote to his family and told them that he had given his life to God. When they visited him, they were amazed at the changes they saw. When Harry and his family prayed together, the guards bowed their heads too. They even left him alone with his mother, for they were convinced he would not try to escape again.

Harry threw himself into prison ministries from the inside. He held meetings, enrolled other prisoners in the Voice of Prophecy Bible courses, and shared books by Ellen White with other prisoners. The Adventist group worshipping in the prison grew to about one hundred before Harry was released.

When Harry returned home, he began working as a literature evangelist. He loves sharing his faith with those he meets and leading them to God. "Leading souls to Jesus is a new and satisfying career, far better than the one that landed me in jail," he testifies.

HARRY MITENGO *lives in Liwonde, Malawi.*

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jeremiah 2:1–28*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review the history of Israel from the Exodus to the time of Jeremiah (ca. 800 years) and identify the common theme of Israel's increasing apostasy.

Feel: Appreciate the sad reality of history repeating itself and marvel at God's extended grace that covered many generations.

Do: Resolve to take a hard look at the patterns of his or her own life and make a decision to follow what is right in God's eyes.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: A History of Apostasy

A Mention some of the dark moments in Israel's history that set the direction toward apostasy.

B What were the common denominators in Israel's history that finally led to the crisis of the Babylonian exile?

II. Feel: A Sad Reality

A How do you feel if somebody disappoints you again and again? How must God have felt?

B What is your reaction to being shaken by a God who eventually turns grace into judgment? Why is such action on God's part sometimes necessary in our behalf?

III. Do: Patterns of Our Lives

A How can we avoid the blind spots in our own lives that keep us from seeing our own spiritual reality?

B How can we learn from history and break out of the cycle of sad repetitions?

► **Summary:** Jeremiah's message addressed a spiritual crisis that eventually led to the Babylonian exile. However, this crisis had been in the making throughout centuries of extended grace, fueled by an increasing apostasy that came about through elevating choices of one's own above God's way.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jeremiah 2:4–8*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God has a spiritual view of history and of our lives. We can learn from the sad history of Israel that led to the crisis of the Babylonian exile. Their experience should help us to make the right decision not to replace the truth with any type of surrogate religion (which really is idolatry).

Just for Teachers: “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 162. A look at Israel’s history between the Exodus and the exile reveals how the lessons of history were forgotten again and again so that, finally, the future, as proclaimed by the prophet Jeremiah, looked very dark. Encourage the class to take a look at their individual histories, as well as the history of our church, in order to see where things have gone wrong (or right), and what we could learn from them.

Opening Discussion: The history of King Omri (885–874 B.C.) in the Old Testament provides an interesting case study for God’s perspective on history. There are 13 short verses dedicated to the life of this unfaithful king that culminate in the sober summary: “Omri did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and did worse than all who were before him” (*1 Kings 16:25, NKJV*). Apparently, the Bible writers didn’t want to waste words on him.

However, if one looks into archaeology and extra-biblical literature, a different picture emerges. He is mentioned on the Mesha Stele (840 B.C.) as king over Israel and also on the Black Obelisk (827 B.C.), which describes in text and image how “Jehu, son of Omri,” is paying tribute to the Assyrian king. A century later, another Assyrian king in two different inscriptions receives the title “Conqueror of Samaria and of the whole land of the house of Omri.” All this means that northern Israel for roughly one hundred fifty years was associated with the name Omri. From an international, political perspective, Omri was an important person; however, from God’s perspective he did not deserve much attention.

Explore with the class the bitter lessons of Israel’s history, which are represented by this case study, asking the question: What went wrong if idolatrous kings could become recognized as political leaders?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The message Jeremiah received did not arise out of a momentary situation but, rather, was the end result of a long history of increasing apostasy, which finally led to the proclamation of judgment with which Jeremiah was tasked. It is important to illustrate to the class the long historical process between the Exodus and the exile that was characterized by God’s grace and His numerous attempts to discipline Israel.

Bible Commentary

Jeremiah 2 is the focus of this week’s study. However, the chapter refers to events in Israel’s history as far back as the Exodus, explaining how Israel got into the crisis situation that preceded the Babylonian exile.

I. Surrogate Religion (*Review Jeremiah 2:1–19 and 1 Kings 12:26–31 with your class.*)

A lot of sad history lies behind the impending crisis that Jeremiah was to prophesy about. Israel’s initial “‘holiness to the LORD’ ” (*Jer. 2:3, NKJV*) when He brought them out of Egypt was lost very soon after God brought them into Canaan, after which time the “prophets prophesied by Baal” (*vs. 8, NKJV*). The real problem was that Israel chose, again and again, surrogate religion over true religion. Jeroboam’s sin of building an alternative sanctuary at Bethel and one at Dan after the division of the kingdom, following Solomon’s death in 930 B.C. (*1 Kings 12:26–31*), exemplifies this pattern.

It was a political and religious move, deliberately aimed at creating an alternative sanctuary and religious system that would prevent the northern Israelites from going to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. Interestingly, the “sins of Jeroboam” became a standard phrase to describe the northern tribes’ apostasy for the next 200 years until the destruction of Samaria, in 722 B.C., by the Assyrian armies (*compare 2 Kings 17:22*). Jeremiah uses an interesting image to illustrate the twofold sin of Israel (*Jer. 2:13*): replacing God as the “‘fountain of living waters’ ” (*NKJV*) with “‘broken cisterns’ ” (*NKJV*). Archaeological excavations often come across cisterns hewn into the rock and covered on the insides with plaster. They usually were used to collect rainwater and preserve it. However, the water often became stagnant, and the plaster inside the cisterns would crack so that the water disappeared.

The image demonstrates the contrast between true and surrogate religion, between God’s provision of life (verse 13 literally says “living waters”) and man-made imitations of that. When we try to dig our own

cisterns to preserve a different type of water from what God provides, it is an exercise that is doomed to failure from the very beginning. Theologically, one could speak of the contrast between righteousness by faith in God and righteousness by our own works.

Consider This: What danger is there for us to commit Israel’s double sin today and play with surrogate religion instead of embracing living, true religion?

II. Where Are Your Gods? (*Review Jeremiah 2:20–28 with your class.*)

Interestingly, the character of surrogate religion is such that it does not provide any real salvation in times of crisis. A number of images illustrate the point, referring in some way to spiritual prostitution (“‘playing the harlot’ ” in *Jer. 2:20, NKJV*). The “‘noble vine’ ” that turns into a “‘degenerate plant of an alien vine’ ” (*vs. 21, NKJV*) reminds us of the *Song of the Vineyard* (*Isa. 5:1–7*), but Jeremiah takes it one step further. In Isaiah the vines produced bad fruit (injustice, bloodshed, etc.); here they turn “alien” (Hebrew *nokriyah*), which is a term frequently used, referring to prostitutes who, in Old Testament times, were habitually associated with foreign women (*compare Prov. 2:16*). A “dromedary,” or she-camel (*Jer. 2:23, NKJV*), breaking loose, and a female “wild donkey” (*vss. 24, 25, NKJV*) that is in heat are both metaphors pointing to the same reality: Israel is committing spiritual adultery, running after other gods. The embarrassment of this century-old apostasy is that of a thief found-out (*vs. 26*), and it reaches all levels of Israelite society, especially its secular and spiritual leadership.

Shame is a strong emotion in the ancient (and modern) Near East. It is often associated with nakedness (*compare Mic. 1:11, 1 Sam. 20:30*), which again forms part of the imagery of spiritual prostitution. Idolatry really exposes people for what they are as they worship objects that, in the final analysis, are just wood and stone. Jeremiah drives home the absurdity and foolishness of idolatry in chapter 2, verse 27: “‘Saying to a tree, “You are my father,” and to a stone, “You gave birth to me” ’ ” (*NKJV*). All these images climax in God’s rhetorical question: “‘But where are your gods that you have made for yourselves?’ ” (*vs. 28, NKJV*). The answer is clear: there is no hope for salvation from these gods “‘in the time of your trouble’ ” (*vs. 28, NKJV*). The oncoming Babylonian crisis from without is really just a result of the ongoing crisis from within; i.e., alienation from God and replacing Him with man-made religion and idolatry.

Consider This: Where do we expect our help to come from in times of crisis? What do we turn to when we go into reflex mode in a crisis situation, and why?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It would be interesting to lead the class in a discussion that would review either the students' own personal histories or the history of their church (local or the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in general) in order to pinpoint the moments when learning from experience took place. This discussion should focus on the positive learning experiences and not on the negative history that possibly led to it, demonstrating how God's grace shines through continuously in our histories.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ When you look at your life, what are the learning experiences that most impacted your relationship with God?
- ❷ What does surrogate religion look like at the beginning of the twenty-first century in your personal life?
- ❸ How can you guard yourself against surrogate religion?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The central thought of Jeremiah 2 is to learn from history and to realize that we are still tempted to replace true with false religion. Activities need to be geared toward this contrast.

Class Activities:

For this exercise you may use a whiteboard or flip chart or anything else you can write on that everybody can see. Alternately, where supplies and space are limited, you may conduct this exercise in discussion format only. Brainstorm with your class on the term “religion” by writing it at the top of your whiteboard or flip chart and then creating two columns underneath, one being “true” and the other being “surrogate” or “false.” Let class members suggest in which column to put their ideas, and discuss why they put them there. The activity should end with an affirmation of true religion.

Individual Activities:

- ❶ Invite class members to take time on Sabbath afternoon to write their own personal life histories, highlighting how God has extended His grace to them again and again.
- ❷ Encourage your class members to talk with somebody (such as a family member, a coworker, a friend) about the contrast between true and surrogate religion. Invite them to share this experience in next Sabbath's class.