

The Crisis Continues



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jeremiah 9, Jer. 10:1–15, Rom. 1:25, Jeremiah 26, Acts 17:30, Acts 5:34–41.*

Memory Text: “But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the LORD” (*Jeremiah 9:24, NKJV*).

The travails and trials of God's servant continue. In fact, pretty much all of the book of Jeremiah deals with the challenges and struggles the prophet had in trying to get the people to listen to the words that the Lord was seeking to convey to them out of love and concern.

Imagine what would have happened if the people had listened to Jeremiah and had accepted the prophet's warning. If they had listened—if the people, the kings, and the leaders had humbled themselves before God—the terrible crisis would not have come. The chance for repentance was before them. Even after they had done so much wrong, so much evil, the door to redemption and salvation had not closed. The door stood open; they simply refused to walk through it.

Again, it's so easy for us today to shake our heads at the hardness of their hearts. “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (*1 Cor. 10:11, NKJV*). We have these examples before us; what will we learn from them?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 14.

Let Him Who Boasts . . .

In Jeremiah 9, the prophet began his lamentation because he saw the inevitable catastrophe coming to his country and people. God pronounced judgment over Jerusalem, and when God says something, He does it. What they would face wasn't something fortuitous, not just one of those terrible and inexplicable things that happen from time to time. No, what they would face was going to be the direct judgment of God. And it was this realization that was causing Jeremiah such sorrow. His sorrow, though, was only a small reflection of the pain that God must have felt.

Though the context is different, this quote captures the idea so well: "The cross is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has brought to the heart of God. Every departure from the right, every deed of cruelty, every failure of humanity to reach His ideal, brings grief to Him. When there came upon Israel the calamities that were the sure result of separation from God,—subjugation by their enemies, cruelty, and death,—it is said that 'His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.' 'In all their affliction He was afflicted: . . . and He bare them, and carried them all the days of old.' Judges 10:16; Isaiah 63:9."—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 263.

Read Jeremiah 9, the prophet's sorrowful lament. Focus especially on verses 23, 24. Why are those words so relevant even to us today?

It has been said that when it comes to death, we are all like an "unwalled city." Wisdom, might, and riches all have their place, but to rely on these things, especially amid catastrophe, or when death looms, is fruitless, meaningless, and empty. Amid all the warnings about the doom, the people are told what really matters, and that is to know and to understand for oneself, at least to the degree that we can, the loving kindness, the justice, and the righteousness of God. What else is there, what else alone can give us hope and comfort when everything earthly, everything human, including our own flesh, fails us?

What does the Cross tell us about the loving-kindness, the justice, and the righteousness of God?

Creatures or the Creator?

As we have seen already, God's people had been called out to be different from the nations around them, which were all steeped in paganism, idolatry, and false teachings. So many of the warnings in the first five books of Moses were especially against following the practices of their neighbors. Instead, the Israelites were to be witnesses to the world of the truth about the Lord as Creator and Redeemer. Unfortunately, so much of Old Testament history is the story of how they were often lured into the very practices that they were warned against.

Read Jeremiah 10:1–15. What is the Lord telling His people here? If this same warning were given today, in our time and culture and context, how might it be written?

Jeremiah is telling the people what they should have already known: these pagan gods are nothing but human creations, figments of people's own demonically warped imaginations. This is a prime example of what Paul, writing centuries later, meant when he wrote about those who "changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen" (*Rom. 1:25*).

Notice in this verse how Paul contrasts the creation and the Creator. This same contrast is presented in these verses in Jeremiah, which talk about the impotence and weakness of these "gods" in contrast to the true One. All through these texts Jeremiah is trying to show the people how foolish and silly it is to put their trust in these things, which are incapable of doing anything. All this in contrast to the Creator God, who not only created the world but sustains it by His power (*see Heb. 1:3*).

However ancient these texts, the message is still so relevant. We might not be tempted to bow down and worship man-made statues; nor are most of us dismayed or worried about the signs in the heavens. Instead, though, it's still so easy to put our trust in things that can no more save us than these idols could save Judea on the day of judgment.

What are some things that, if we are not careful, we come to trust more than we should?

A Call to Repentance

Read Jeremiah 26:1–6. What hope is the Lord offering the people here?

The message here was the same as the message all through the Bible, Old and New Testament, and that is the call to repentance, to turn away from our sin and find the salvation that God offers to all.

What is the message of the following texts? *2 Chron. 6:37–39, Ezek. 14:6, Matt. 3:2, Luke 24:47, Acts 17:30.*

“The inhabitants of Judah were all undeserving, yet God would not give them up. By them His name was to be exalted among the heathen. Many who were wholly unacquainted with His attributes were yet to behold the glory of the divine character. It was for the purpose of making plain His merciful designs that He kept sending His servants the prophets with the message, ‘Turn ye again now everyone from his evil way.’ Jeremiah 25:5. ‘For My name’s sake,’ He declared through Isaiah, ‘will I defer Mine anger, and for My praise will I refrain for thee, that I cut thee not off.’ ‘For Mine own sake, even for Mine own sake, will I do it: for how should My name be polluted? and I will not give My glory unto another.’ Isaiah 48:9, 11.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 319.

Old Testament, New Testament—in the end, the message of God is the same to all of us: we are sinners, we have done wrong, we deserve punishment. But through the cross of Christ, through the atoning death of Jesus, God has made a way for all of us to be saved. We need to acknowledge our sinfulness; we need to claim by faith the merits of Jesus, which are freely given us despite our unworthiness; and we need to repent of our sin. And, of course, true repentance includes putting sin out of our lives by the grace of God.

No matter what we have done, we can repent of our sin and be forgiven. This is the great provision of the gospel. What sin, or sins, do you need to repent of right now?

The Call for Death

From our perspective looking back, it's hard to believe the hardness of the hearts of the people. As we saw in yesterday's lesson, Jeremiah's message—however strong—was still filled with hope. If they repented, God would avert the horrific punishments that, based on the covenant promises and curses, would come upon them. If only they would do what they were supposed to do, if only they would obey God and obtain the blessing that obedience would bring, then all would be well. God would forgive, God would heal, God would restore. The gospel provision, which would eventually come through the sacrifice of Jesus, would be enough to forgive all their sins and restore the people.

What a message of hope, of promise, of salvation!

What was the response to Jeremiah and his message? (See *Jer. 26:10, 11*.)

In Israel, only a legally assembled court could pass a death sentence. Only a majority vote of the judges was acceptable for the death sentence. The priests and the prophets prosecuted Jeremiah with their deadly accusations. Those opposed to him wanted to present him as a political criminal and as a traitor.

What was Jeremiah's response? (*Jer. 26:13–15*).

Jeremiah didn't back down at all; with the threat of death before him, the prophet, no doubt in some fear, nevertheless did not soften a single word of the message that he had been given by the Lord, who specially warned him at the start not to hold back a word (*Jer. 26:2*). Thus, in contrast to the Jeremiah who at times was whining, complaining, and cursing the day of his birth, we see him now as a man of God who is standing faithfully and with conviction.

When was the last time you had to stand faithfully, at a personal cost to yourself, for the truth as it is in Jesus? If you never have had to do that, what's wrong?

Jeremiah's Escape

As we saw yesterday, whatever his fears, whatever his own emotions, Jeremiah stood firm, fully aware of the potential death that his stance could bring him. He warned the princes and the people very clearly in Jeremiah 26:15 (“know for certain” *[NKJV]*, he said) that if they killed him they would face punishment for spilling innocent blood. Jeremiah knew that he was not guilty of the charges against him.

Read Jeremiah 26:16–24. How did Jeremiah escape death?

How fascinating that the priests and the prophets, the ones who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders, had to be rebuked and challenged by mere “elders” and “regular people” who came forward in defense of Jeremiah. They brought up the memory of Micah, who had lived a century before Jeremiah, in Israel. The king then did not hurt Micah but listened to his advice, the whole nation repented, and disaster was averted, at least for a time. Now these people in Jeremiah’s day were wiser than their leaders and wanted to spare the nation from making a big mistake by putting a prophet of God to death.

The acquittal emphasized that Jeremiah was not guilty of those things he was accused of. However, the priests’ and prophets’ hatred became stronger. Anger and the desire for revenge rose in them so that at a later time they would pounce on Jeremiah with their full fury. His release meant only a moment of ease for the prophet. He was not completely out of danger.

What we can see here is an example of how some people learned lessons from history while others, knowing the same history, refused to learn the same lessons. We can see something similar centuries later, with the Pharisee Gamaliel and his caution to other leaders concerning how to handle the followers of Jesus.

Read Acts 5:34–41. What parallels exist here with what happened to Jeremiah? More important, what lesson can we ourselves learn from history and from the mistakes of those who have come before us?

Further Thought: “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). No doubt we can look around in nature, in human relationships, and in the marvels of the creation itself and get a view of God’s love, however much sin has damaged that creation as well as our ability to appreciate or even read it correctly. But at the cross, veils were torn off, and the world was given the starkest and sharpest revelation possible of that love—a love so great that it led to what Ellen G. White called “the sundering of the divine powers.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 924.

The sundering of the divine powers?

So great was God’s love for us that the Godhead, whose members loved each other from eternity, endured this “sundering” in order to redeem us. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) is the clearest and most powerful expression of that “sundering,” of what it cost to save us. Here, we can again see the pain and suffering the Lord has endured because of our sin.

No wonder, then, that “we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, NIV). Of course, as fallen humans we only imitate that love, and even that imitation is often warped by our own selfishness and sinful desires. God’s love transcends ours; we reflect God’s love the way an oily mud puddle reflects the sky.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Though many of us today don’t worship animals or things in nature the way the ancients did, in what ways are we still in danger of making an idol or a god out of nature itself?
- 2 What is the role of repentance in the life of a Christian? That is, outside of one’s initial repentance in the course of first accepting Jesus, what role does repentance continue to have in the life of faith?
- 3 Try to wrap your mind around the idea of the “sundering of the divine powers.” How are we to understand this? If nothing else, what does this tell us about just how deadly and costly sin is?

Enlarge My Vision: Part 2

After completing high school, I worked as a literature evangelist for three years. One day I visited a hospital, and there I saw someone who looked familiar. I barely recognized him, but it was one of my former drinking buddies, my childhood friend. He was dying of tuberculosis and AIDS. I stared at him in shock as he lay there unconscious. It was too late for me to share Christ with him; but I couldn't shake the realization that if I had resisted God's call, it could have been me lying there. My former friend died a few days later. This experience deepened my conviction that I must answer God's call whenever and wherever it comes. To put it off could mean death.

I planned to be a literature evangelist for the rest of my life. After all, it had been the printed page that had influenced me to consider Christ. But the local field called me to pastor three churches. I had no training as a minister and had never thought about doing this kind of work. I struggled to decide whether to take this call, because it was not in the direction I thought God had been leading me. Nevertheless, I finally accepted the call.

After I had been in the ministry for several years, the conference urged me to study at Solusi University. During school breaks, I held evangelistic meetings wherever someone asked me to go. Word spread that I was willing, and more invitations came. I discovered that this is what I love to do.

During an evangelism field school, a speaker challenged us to expand our vision of how God can use us. "Don't limit yourself," he said, "and don't limit God." The speaker's words challenged me. But how could I expand my vision of what God expected of me? He had already done so much more than I thought would ever be possible!

Several months later I received a call to hold evangelistic meetings in South Africa. I looked at the calendar and realized that the dates they gave me were the dates of my final exams. Because of my prayer for God to expand my territory, I didn't tell the people in South Africa of my dilemma, but I fasted and prayed that God would make it possible for me to go. I believed God would open the way. I knew that the dates for the meetings were not changeable, and I knew I could not change my exam schedule. God went to work on my behalf, and I learned that my exams had been moved up a full week. I could take my exams and still minister in South Africa!

The meetings were such a blessing. Nineteen people gave their lives to God. Surely God has increased my territory, enlarged my vision, and made a worthless sinner into a willing instrument of God's power.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jeremiah 9:1–26*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Study the biblical concept of what it means to *know* God and what happens when there is no knowledge of Him.

Feel: Appreciate why Jeremiah chose the form of a lament to communicate God’s deep sorrow over a people who have chosen to worship the creature before their Creator.

Do: Reflect on the areas in his or her life that cause God pain and practice repentance in the true biblical sense.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Knowing God

A What does it mean to know God? Why is this more than just an intellectual knowledge, as in knowing the doctrine of God?

B What are the areas in our lives that are affected in a practical way by the knowledge of God?

II. Feel: Lament

A One of the deepest pains we can feel is when a loved one dies. What did God want to communicate through the funeral lament that Jeremiah proclaimed in chapter 9?

B What does it mean in practical terms when we worship the creature over the Creator?

III. Do: Repentance

A Repentance is not a popular word. What does true biblical repentance look like?

B There are moments when we need to stand up like Jeremiah and call others to repentance. What might be some of the dangers involved in that?

► **Summary:** Knowing or not knowing God is clearly reflected in practical ways in our lives. It is foremost a relational knowledge that translates itself into Christian behavior. Where knowledge of God is lacking, idolatry in all its forms sets in, and there is need for true repentance.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 1:25, Jeremiah 10:1–15*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As fallen human beings, we often find it easier to worship the creature instead of worshipping the Creator. True worship requires an intimate relationship between our Creator and us that is based on an acknowledgment of our sinful state, repentance, and salvation received. It’s so much easier to worship things that we can control or even people we can manipulate.

Just for Teachers: Idols are powerful and always have been. It is interesting to study in the book of Jeremiah that the opposite of knowing God is often related to unjust behavior but foremost to idolatry. In other words, if I don’t have a saving knowledge of God, I will “know” something else that can fill this vacuum and bow before some form of a created thing or creature instead of the Creator. While the idols of biblical times might not necessarily attract us to worship them these days, there are enough modern idols that could provide a good contextualization of Jeremiah’s message for the class. If possible, bring an image of the archaeological object described below. It can easily be found in books on archaeology or on the British Museum’s Web site.

Opening Discussion: In the 1920s and 1930s, Sir Charles Leonard Woolley excavated the Royal Tombs of Ur, the ancient city on the Euphrates River, close to the Persian Gulf where Abraham was born. In a deep pit, named by Woolley the “Great Death Pit,” a number of beautiful artifacts were found, one of them being a statue, 45 cm (18 inches) in height, that showed a goat reaching upward into a tree so as to get to the most tasty leaves. Woolley first identified it as the ram caught in the thicket from the story of Abraham and Isaac (*compare Gen. 22:13*). However, further study has shown that it is a popular religious motif on ancient Near Eastern images, showing the tree of life, which was worshiped in the context of fertility rituals.

While the motif may very well have a biblical origin (remember, there was a tree of life in Eden), it came to be worshiped widely throughout the ancient Near East and connected to fertility. Worship of the Creator was replaced by worship of the creature. However, if one analyzes the object, it is “just” a statue whose legs and head are covered in gold leaf, with lapis lazuli (semiprecious stone) as horns, and shells for the remainder of the body, except for the genitals, which are also of gold (pointing to its

importance in ancient fertility-cult worship).

At the end of the day, a talented goldsmith some forty-five hundred years ago had a design idea, acquired the materials, and made the idol. Which modern idols are you able to identify? If you analyze them, how are they made, and what makes them attractive for worship?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: We need to realize that every sin has an echo, not only in our lives here on earth but also in heaven. And this is not only about keeping records. It is about a God who grieves when His children make mistakes. As much as there is joy over every sinner who returns (*compare Luke 15:7, 10*), there is also sadness over every sinner who does not repent. Parents who see their children make wrong (and hopefully also right) choices can probably get a glimpse of what God must be going through. This is because it is really all about a relationship that is deeply affected by sin. The biblical concept of “knowing” God illustrates the point.

Bible Commentary

The gospel of both the Old and New Testament is not too complicated. When we lose sight of God, we open the doors for alternative relationships (often called “idolatry”); He tries to heal our broken relationship in calling us to repentance, but, unfortunately, we, too, often resist. This is what Jeremiah experienced as the mouthpiece (prophet) of God.

I. Weeping for Lack of Knowledge (*Review Jeremiah 9:1–26 with your class.*)

The weeping of Jeremiah in this chapter is really the weeping of God. Repeatedly, the intimate covenant expression “my people” is used (*for example, vss. 1, 2, and 7*). God’s weeping (through His prophet) reminds us of a similar display of emotion when Jesus contemplates the multitudes that are as sheep without a shepherd (*Matt. 9:36*) or when He mourns over Lazarus’s death (*John 11:35*). It’s all about relationship and, more specifically, broken relationships.

God, through Jeremiah, repeatedly brings the relational crisis with His people to the point: “they do not know me.” Four times the Hebrew root *yada’* (“to know”) is used in this chapter (*Jer. 9:3, 6, 16, 24*), but the meaning of this word is not so much referring to the intellectual ability to retain information about somebody as to an expression of highest relational quality. This word is well-illustrated by its usage to describe the most intimate relationship between husband and wife in the Old

Testament: “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain” (*Gen. 4:1, NKJV*). So, the lack of the knowledge of God is a lack of relationship with Him. And conversely, knowledge of God is the only thing we can safely boast about (*compare Jer. 9:24*).

Consider This: How do you know God? In what ways are we sometimes tempted to reduce our knowledge of God to an intellectual exercise instead of a personal relationship?

II. Repentance and Rejection (*Review Jeremiah 26:1–17 and Acts 17:30 with your class.*)

We have to remember that the book of Jeremiah is not chronologically ordered. Jeremiah 26 (which actually is dated before chapter 25) records the temple sermon that the prophet preached early in the reign of Jehoiakim, sometime between 609 and 608 B.C. There was still the possibility to repent and to avert the exile, but time was running out. It was a practical application of what God had outlined theoretically with the image of the potter, in chapter 18.

Maybe “everyone will listen and turn from his evil way” (*26:3, NKJV*). However, the reaction was not positive, and Jeremiah was arrested and tried in court. However, the accused, very much like Stephen in the New Testament (*compare Acts 7*), became the accuser, and Jeremiah 26:8–16 describe a complete trial in which God, through Jeremiah, used another opportunity to call His people to repentance. Jeremiah was not so much concerned with the imminent threat of his death but with the destiny of his people.

Consider This: It was unbearable for the leaders of Judah to listen to Jeremiah’s message. They could not bear that the prophet was speaking about the possible destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. This did not fit into their worldview because the temple had become an idol and its mere presence was to them the insurance against Babylon (*compare 7:4*). Similarly, what, if any, are the messages we might not like to hear?

III. Standing Up for God (*Review Jeremiah 26:17–24 and Acts 5:34–41 with your class.*)

Just as Gamaliel stood up for the apostles after Peter had been freed from prison and had returned to the temple to preach, God raised “certain elders” who defended Jeremiah and prevented him from being sentenced to death. They almost verbatim quoted from Micah 3:12, which indicates that Micah’s message—initially proclaimed during the time of Hezekiah, roughly a hundred years before Jeremiah—had already been written and ascribed with canonical status.

Micah's words were heard and heeded, but Jeremiah's were not, which created a strong contrast between faithful King Hezekiah and unfaithful King Jehoiakim. However, Micah's words were reiterated with conviction and at the appropriate time, and the dire situation Jeremiah found himself in was defused.

Consider This: Standing up for God is not an easy thing to do in the midst of a hostile environment and peer pressure. What could keep you from speaking up for God?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: We can stand up with conviction only for someone or something we know. Knowing God is an experiential and relational exercise, which leads away from any form of idolatry. Instead, it leads to strong biblical convictions and ethically correct behavior. It is heartening for our own faith to see that Jeremiah was not completely alone but had those who stood up for him.

Thought/Application Questions:

❶ Idolatry implies sacrifice to the idols we create. In ancient Israel, it was sometimes even child sacrifice. What are the things or people we are tempted to sacrifice on the altars of this world?

❷ How can we make the message of repentance a positive part of our Christian experience and church message?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Media plays a central role in most societies today. From cell phones and tablets to computers and TVs, we are constantly bombarded with the idols of this world. As a Christian, we need to critically evaluate our usage and dependence on media.

Class/Individual Activity:

Encourage class members to do a media fast for a certain period of time during the next week and to have, wherever it is possible, one day (or some other time period) without cell phones, TVs, or other media gadgets. Report back on the experience next Sabbath in class.