

Back to Egypt



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 40:7–16, Jeremiah 41–43, Exod. 16:3, Num. 16:13, Jeremiah 44.*

Memory Text: “May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the LORD your God sends you to tell us” (*Jeremiah 42:5, NIV*).

This week's lesson brings us toward the end of the saga of Jeremiah the prophet. However, this is not an “and they lived happily ever after” ending. In a sense, one could summarize this week's study, and even a good portion of the book of Jeremiah, by saying that what we see here is an example of the limits of grace. That is, grace will not save those who utterly refuse to accept it. No matter how much the Lord spoke to them, offering them salvation, protection, redemption, peace, and prosperity, all but a tiny and faithful remnant scorned and rebuffed God's offer.

And what of Jeremiah? His was a life and work that from all human appearances seemed futile! The “weeping prophet” had plenty to weep about. Even after everything he warned about came to pass, the people still clung to their sins and paganism and rebellion, openly defying the prophet to his face and scorning the Word of the Lord to them.

How we need to be careful ourselves. Grace is grace because it's given to the undeserving, yes; but it's not forced on anyone. We must be willing to accept it.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 19.

Political Anarchy

One would think that with the destruction of the city and the total defeat by the Babylonians, all the people would have learned their lesson. Unfortunately, not all did, and the drama wasn't over yet.

Read Jeremiah 40:7–16. What message was given (again) to the people? What is the significance of the word *remnant* used in verse 11?

Despite the message of peace, and even the ensuing prosperity (*see Jer. 40:12*), not everyone was content with the status quo.

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

Though the reasons for the assassination weren't given, the fact that it had been done by someone of the “royal family and of the officers of the king” (*Jer. 41:1, NKJV*) suggests that these elitists still had not accepted the idea that the chosen nation needed to submit to Babylonian rule. Because Gedaliah had been put on the throne by the king of Babylon (*see Jer. 40:5*), these people might have seen him as a treasonous puppet who was disloyal to the nation and who therefore had to be eliminated along with his court.

As the chapter continues, we can see that this remnant now faced a new threat: fear of the Babylonians, who—perhaps not knowing the details of what happened—would seek revenge for the death of Gedaliah and the Babylonian soldiers (*see Jer. 41:3*).

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, by our disobedience, we can bring pain and suffering to others, even those who had nothing to do with our sins?

Seeking Divine Guidance

Read Jeremiah 42. What powerful message is found there, not just for them, but for anyone who seeks guidance from the Lord in prayer?

Fearful of the Babylonians, the people seek out Jeremiah and ask him to pray for them for divine guidance. They must have known by now that Jeremiah was indeed a prophet of God, and what he said when he spoke in the name of the Lord would come true.

They also vowed they would do whatever God asked or commanded them to do. So, as we read, we see a people who seem to have learned their lesson, who want not only to know what God’s will is but, more important, to follow it. The words—“Whether it is pleasing or displeasing, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God to whom we send you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the LORD our God” (*Jer. 42:6, NKJV*)—were a powerful confession of faith. After all that had happened, it was about time.

Notice the parallel here with Jeremiah’s earlier messages: *don’t trust in foreign powers. Trust in the Lord, and He will prosper you and He will deliver you when the time is right. Salvation isn’t from anywhere or anyone else. The foreign powers didn’t help you before, and they won’t help you now.*

God has to warn them because He knows the tendency of their hearts: He knows that they are thinking of going back to Egypt (think of the symbolism here) in order to seek the protection they wanted. So, the Lord gave them very clear and specific commands not to do that, that such a course would bring ruin upon them.

Again, such a stark choice, the choice we all have to face: life and peace through faith and obedience to Jesus, or misery and death through lack of faith and lack of obedience. No matter the different circumstances, in the end the issue is the same for all of us. Unlike these people, we don’t always have the warnings given to us so specifically and so clearly expressed, 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?

Returning to Egypt

If you haven't read ahead, Jeremiah 42 could be very exciting. What will the people do? Would they reach out in faith, a faith that is revealed in obedience, and remain in Judah? Or would they make the same mistakes that were made in the past, and instead of following a clear "thus saith the LORD," do what they want to do, despite the Lord's 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?

When God's Word does not agree with our intentions or desires, we tend to have doubts about its divine origins. Likewise, the people and the leaders had doubts about Jeremiah. Apparently, in Israel, only the circumstances had changed, but the people remained the same in their thinking and in their heart. They excused themselves from their vow by attacking the prophet Jeremiah. However, they did not want to attack the aged Jeremiah directly. So, they blamed Baruch, his friend and sometimes scribe, and turned their wrath against him, claiming that he had turned the prophet against them.

Read Exodus 16:3 and Numbers 16:13. What parallels exist between what the people said to Jeremiah and what their ancestors said to Moses?

Human nature is human nature, always looking for someone else to blame for its problems, always looking for an excuse to do what it wants. Thus, for whatever reason, Baruch was accused of wanting all of his countrymen to die by the hand of the Babylonians or to be taken into exile there. Jeremiah 43:1–7 does not say why the people thought Baruch wanted this to happen, any more than Scripture explains why the children of Israel thought Moses wanted them to die in the wilderness after they had left Egypt. People in the thrall of emotions and passions may not have sound reasons for their thinking. How crucial it is, then, that we keep our passions and emotions submitted to the Lord!

How often do we allow emotions or passions to cloud our judgment or even override a clear "thus saith the LORD"? How can we protect ourselves from letting emotions and passions get the better of us? (See 2 Cor. 10:5.)

Taken Into Exile

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

Tahpanhes was a town at the northeastern border of Egypt that had significant fortifications and where a great number of Jewish colonists lived.

Here again, the Lord wants Jeremiah to act out a prophecy symbolically. Even though words are powerful, sometimes when things are done in real life, when they are acted out before us, the point comes through even more strongly.

How exactly Jeremiah was to bury stones at the entrance to Pharaoh's house, we aren't told. The point, however, was clear: even the mighty pharaohs were no match for the Lord, and He would fulfill His word just as He had said. The refugees who thought that they would find protection and safety by going to Egypt were as wrong as those who, as we saw earlier, thought that they could find protection and safety by having Egypt come to them (*Jer: 37:7, 8*). The Egyptian gods were useless, figments of warped imaginations; these gods were pagan abominations that kept the people in abject ignorance of truth. The Israelites should have known, as we should now know, that our only true protection and safety is in obeying the Lord.

“When self-denial becomes a part of our religion, we shall understand and do the will of God; for our eyes will be anointed with eye-salve so that we shall behold wonderful things out of his law. We shall see the path of obedience as the only path of safety. God holds his people responsible in proportion as the light of truth is brought to their understanding. The claims of his law are just and reasonable, and through the grace of Christ he expects us to fulfill his requirements.”—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 25, 1890.

Think about the symbolism, too, in the Israelites' going back to Egypt in their desire to find safety. How ironic! In a spiritual sense, what are ways that we could be tempted to “go back to Egypt” to find what we think we can't find with the Lord?

Open Defiance

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

During the Egyptian captivity, Jeremiah had to face the same problem he had while he and his people had lived in Judah. At that time he had to talk to the leaders; now he had to talk to the common people, who in captivity were committing some of the same sins that brought this devastation on them to begin with.

What startling answer did they give to Jeremiah when confronted by their sins? (*Jer. 44:15–19*).

The hardness of their hearts and the deception that had overtaken them are astonishing. Basically, they looked Jeremiah in the face and defied him and what he spoke to them in “the name of the Lord.”

The rationale was simple: in the early days, before the reforms of Josiah, when they were heavily steeped in worshipping pagan gods, even burning incense to the “queen of heaven” and pouring out drink offerings to her, things went well for them. They were materially well off and dwelt in safety. However, it was only *after* the reforms of Josiah (which were too late) that calamity struck. So, why should they listen to Jeremiah and all his warnings?

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

What about those who, steeped in sin and unbelief, seem to be doing very well, while at times faithful Christians go through terrible trials? How do we work our way through this reality?

Further Thought: All through the book of Jeremiah, as through all the Bible, we are confronted with the question of good and evil. And as Christians we know good from evil, because God has defined these terms for us in many different ways. (See, for example, Rom. 7:7, Mic. 6:8, Josh. 24:15, Matt. 22:37–39, Deut. 12:8.) But what if you don't believe in God? How can you know good from evil? Well, atheist author Sam Harris has a suggestion. He wrote a book called *The Moral Landscape*, in which he argues that good and evil can and should be understood only in terms of science. That is, the same way that science has helped us understand the difference between the strong nuclear force and the weak nuclear force, it should help us know right from wrong and good from evil. He even speculates 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 relevant change in the human brain can be made cheaply, painlessly, and safely. The cure for psychopathy can be put directly into the food supply like vitamin D. Evil is now nothing more than a nutritional deficiency."—Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010), Kindle Edition, p. 109. Most scientists, however, even those who don't believe in God, would have a problem believing that science can solve these problems. If, however, you don't believe in God, where else can you find these solutions?

Discussion Questions:

- 1 "With us, everything depends on how we accept the Lord's terms."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 118. Why is it a mistake to assume that salvation comes with no condition? Conditions are not the same things as works, or something that gives us merit before God. How can we learn to differentiate between the false teaching of salvation by works (legalism) and the false teaching that salvation is unconditional (cheap grace)?
- 2 Dwell more on the difficult question at the end of Thursday's study. If someone says, "I don't believe in Jesus, I don't even believe in God, and yet 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 respond?

All Things Work Together for Good

Like many young people in Africa, Siyoka migrated from his village to a larger town in search of a job. He lived with relatives and sent every cent he could back to his widowed mother and two younger brothers.

It was the music that first attracted him to the meetings held by Pastor Mbena; but when he heard the story of Jesus, Siyoka kept thinking about how wonderful it would be to go to heaven with Him, and to *never be hungry, sad, lonely, or afraid again!*

After the meetings, Siyoka returned home. Perhaps, someday, he could become a pastor too. The local elder who was in charge of following up with those who had attended the meetings thought Siyoka had lost interest when he left town. But at home Siyoka did whatever work he could to pay for his school fees, as well as care for the family garden. But that year the rains did not come. Sadly the villagers watched their crops wither and die. Sometimes there was a little rain but not the steady, soaking rains needed to bring life to the barren earth.

The famine was terrible. Many died and many more, including Siyoka, became sick. In desperation, his mother, seeing he was about to die, managed to bring him to a hospital in the nearest city. It was there that Pastor Mbena, visiting some of his church members, found him.

After relating these events, Siyoka's thin face lit up as he said in a weak whisper, "God is good, Pastor Mbena. He kept me from dying in the famine, and now I will be alive to see my people baptized. You will come to my village, won't you?"

"Yes, Siyoka, I must come to your village and hold some meetings so your people can learn about Jesus," answered the pastor warmly.

"Oh, they already know Jesus, Pastor!" Siyoka assured him earnestly. "There are 25 ready to be baptized. I told them everything I learned when I attended your meetings and taught them the songs too. I met with them every Sabbath. Even when the famine was really bad we prayed, and God answered our prayers. He brought me here so I could find you. When can you come?"

Pastor Mbena could hardly believe his ears. This boy who had had so little opportunity to learn had become a preacher for God! When Siyoka was well enough to go home, the pastor accompanied him. He visited the people and found that they had indeed been well taught. What a wonderful day it was when Siyoka and his 25 converts were baptized.

This story was written by CHARLOTTE ISHKANIAN.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Jeremiah 42:13–22, Exodus 16:3, Acts 7:39*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Study the final history of Judah after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, characterized by murder and intrigue and the reversed exodus back into Egypt.

Feel: Shudder at the reality of sin and human nature that refuses to learn from history.

Do: Resolve to learn from history and accept even the hard lessons that God needs to teach him or her.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Going Back to Egypt

A Going back to Egypt was popular in Jeremiah's time. What were some of the occasions when God's people wanted to go back to Egypt?

B Why could one speak of a reversal of the Exodus in the book of Jeremiah?

II. Feel: Reality, Denial, and Sin Perpetuated

A What was Jeremiah's role after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem? How must he have felt when the Jews decided to go back to Egypt?

B What was the final outcome of the return to Egypt? Why didn't the Jews find peace in Tahpanhes?

III. Do: Breaking the Vicious Cycle

A What does it take to learn from history? Why do we as humans tend to commit the same mistakes again and again?

B How is it possible to break the vicious cycle of perpetuated sin? What hope is there?

► **Summary:** Jeremiah 40–44 tells a very sad story: the events subsequent to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem demonstrate how human nature continues to go deeper and deeper into sin until it returns completely into the slavery of sin as illustrated by the return of the Jews to Egypt. There is one ray of hope: God stays with us as Jeremiah stayed with the people, trying all the way.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jeremiah 40:7–16, Jeremiah 41*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The senseless killing of Gedaliah impacted the whole community of Jews who had remained in Judah following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. It demonstrates the disastrous effects that sin has on a whole community.

Just for Teachers: To this day Judaism commemorates the assassination of Gedaliah, the governor of Judah who had been installed by Nebuchadnezzar after the destruction of Jerusalem. It took place during the seventh month (Tishri), in 586 B.C., or possibly also in 582 B.C., coinciding with a further deportation of Jews to Babylon, which could have taken place as a reprisal to the killing of the Babylonian governor (*compare Jer. 52:30*).

The killing, which violated the laws of ancient Near Eastern hospitality, set off a chain of events that finally led to the disintegration of the Jewish community in Egypt where they had fled to escape the wrath of the Babylonian Empire. Discuss with the class Gedaliah's story and highlight the far-reaching effects it had on the whole community. Sin is never an isolated issue and always has an impact on family and community.

Opening Discussion: It does not happen every day that archaeology can make a direct connection with a biblical personality. Ancient Near Eastern stamp-seals are usually less than an inch (1.5 cm) in size, often made from semiprecious stones, and incised with minute details to create an intricate image that often consists of either a personal name, an image, or a combination of both. They were mostly worn around the neck on a string and used to sign documents or authenticate the owner of the seal.

Three inscribed seals, or rather the impressions of them, have been discovered that connect with the story of Jeremiah, offering an almost unprecedented archaeological connection between biblical text and artifacts. The first one is a seal impression reading “(Belonging) to Berekhyahu (Baruch), the son of Neriyaahu, the scribe.” It was discovered in 1975 in an antiquity shop and attests to the historicity of Jeremiah's scribe. In 2005 and 2008, respectively, two more seal impressions were found during archaeological excavations in Jerusalem, the first one reading, “Belonging to Yehucal, son of Shelemiyahu, son of Shovi.” This is

the same Jehucal (or Jucal) who wanted to kill Jeremiah (*compare Jer. 37:3, 38:1*). Finally, the last impression reads “belonging to Gedaliah, son of Pashur.” All objects have been dated to the time of Jeremiah. Thus, we have a strong archaeological witness to the sad story that developed toward the end of Jeremiah’s ministry.

The other Gedaliah found in the Jeremiah story was the son of Ahikam, who became governor of what was left of Judah. This Gedaliah was brutally murdered by Ishmael, one of King Zedekiah’s officers, after he had innocently offered him hospitality, one of the most sacred customs in the ancient Near East (*see 40:7–16*). How bad can it get? How do you react if your trust in somebody close to you is abused and deeply disappointed?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Jeremiah 40–45 demonstrates how the Jews who are not deported to Babylon continue their lives. One would think that they got the message with the destruction of the city and of the temple, but it is staggering to see how they just continue to travel further down the road of sin on which Israel had been for many years. It could only have a sad ending, and just as God had miraculously led them out of the slavery of Egypt, they voluntarily chose to return to Egypt against God’s counsel, but still accompanied by Jeremiah.

Bible Commentary

I. Selective Hearing (*Review Jeremiah 42 with your class.*)

After Gedaliah’s murder, everybody came to inquire of Jeremiah. The text makes it clear that even the people who had despised him beforehand were now eager to inquire of him (*Jer. 42:1*). There is an interesting alternation between the phrases “the LORD your God” and “the LORD our God,” illustrating the vacillating relationship between Judah and God.

Verses 5, 6 are a pious plea of obedience to whatever God’s answer would be. The wording echoes the covenant confirmation of Israel at Mount Sinai (*Exod. 24:7*), which was straight away followed by a similar display of disobedience—the golden-calf episode. This response parallels what happens after Jeremiah warns them not to go to Egypt but, rather, to stay in Judah. The people begin to blame Baruch for inciting Jeremiah against them, and this once more recalls the story of the Exodus as the people blamed Moses for bringing them out of Egypt. Jeremiah’s final appeal is more than just an urge. The phrase “ ‘Do not go to Egypt!’ ” in Jeremiah 42:19 (*NKJV*) is a categorical prohibition that uses the same absolute language as the Ten Commandments. This was not optional, and

going to Egypt would be a clear violation of God's command.

Consider This: Jeremiah called the people “hypocrites” in verse 20. What was so extremely hypocritical in their dealings with Jeremiah (and God) in this chapter?

II. Another Symbolic Act *(Review Jeremiah 43:8–13 with your class.)*

The final kings of Israel always had considered Egypt as the superpower that would help them out against the Babylonians. Consequently, that was the place to which they thought they should escape. But Isaiah had already identified Egypt as a weak and splintered reed that would pierce the hand of the one who would lean on it (*compare Isa. 36:6*).

One of Jeremiah's last symbolic acts was performed when he was in Egypt and served to disillusion any false hopes the Jews had regarding Egypt's protective power. Tahpanhes (modern Tell Defneh) was a city in the northeastern Nile delta, which served as an entry point into Egypt, and Jeremiah was to bury large stones in the brick pavement in front of the government building. It would be the same place where Nebuchadnezzar would set up his royal throne when he eventually conquered Egypt, which happened in 587–568 B.C. The message was clear: Judah had been “appointed for captivity” (*Jer. 43:11, NKJV*) and the escape to Egypt did not change anything.

Consider This: What are the things, institutions, or people in which we place our trust? How can we know they are trustworthy?

III. Back to Egypt *(Review Jeremiah 44, Exodus 16:3, and Acts 7:39 with your class.)*

One of the most astonishing elements in the story of the return to Egypt is that Jeremiah accompanies his people. He had the opportunity to opt out (*compare Jer. 39:11–40:5*) and live out his days in Babylon under the provisions of King Nebuchadnezzar. But he chose to remain with the people in Judah who eventually took him to Egypt.

Chapter 44 records Jeremiah's last message, directed to the Jews who had settled and dispersed in Egypt over time. The chapter has been dated to around 580 B.C. It is a final last message that reiterates that those who thought that an escape to Egypt would provide a safe haven would ultimately have to face God's judgment there, as would those who had been deported to Babylon (*vss. 11–14*).

The reaction of the people was shockingly in line with their behavior before: they openly confessed their allegiance to the “queen of heaven” (*vss. 15–19*), possibly Asherah, the female Canaanite goddess of fertility.

They had fully returned to Egypt. It was an Exodus in reverse, an Eisodus, a deliberate return into the slavery of sin and a defiant refusal to listen to God's voice. Stephen in his speech before the council expressed this reality, poignantly recalling the story of the Exodus: " 'And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt' " (*Acts 7:39, NKJV*). Israel and Judah for centuries had been turning back in their hearts to Egypt, and the physical return after the destruction of Jerusalem was just an outward confirmation of what had taken place long ago in their hearts.

Consider This: What does it mean in practical terms to return to Egypt in one's heart?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Neither Jeremiah's fate following this message nor the lot of the Jewish community in Egypt is known. It must not have been a good one, according to the prophet's last words.

Thought/Application Questions:

❶ Have you ever intended to follow God's way but then, when He showed it to you, you did not like it? How did you deal with this situation?

❷ Returning to Egypt in one's heart is still a sobering reality. What is there in spiritual "Egypt" that has such a strong pull on us?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Return to Egypt has been the center of this week's lesson study. As Seventh-day Adventists we often have moved out of spiritual "Egypt"—out of sinful addictions, crime and hate, social marginalization—yet, there are still many who need to be freed from Egypt in a spiritual sense.

Class/Individual Activity:

Think of a place in your community that might qualify as "Egypt" and plan an outreach program to reach people who live there and who might just be waiting to be called out of it.