

Lessons From Jeremiah



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Jer. 2:13, 6:20, 7:1–10, Matt. 9:12, Deut. 6:5, Jer. 10:1–15, 23:1–8.*

Memory Text: “Behold, the days are coming,’ says the LORD, ‘that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth’ ” (*Jeremiah 23:5, NKJV*).

We’re now at the end of our study of Jeremiah. It’s been an adventure; a lot of drama, emotion, and energy have been expended in the saga of our prophet.

Like all the prophets, Jeremiah didn’t write in a vacuum: his was a message from the Lord and for people at a specific time and place and under specific circumstances.

And yet, however radically different his circumstances were from ours or from those of the many other generations who have read Jeremiah, crucial principles expressed there are the same for God’s people in every generation.

Such as faithfulness to God and obedience to His commandments. Such as true religion, a religion of the heart, as opposed to empty and dead rituals that can leave people in a false state of complacency. Such as the people’s willingness to listen to correction, even when it cuts across what they want to hear. Such as true revival and reformation. Such as trusting in the Lord and His promises instead of the arm of flesh. Such as . . .

The list goes on. This week, let’s take a look at some of the many lessons we can learn from this revelation of God’s love for His people even amid many thunderous warnings to them about where their actions will lead.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 26.

Jeremiah's Lord

Seventh-day Adventists understand that at the center of the great controversy exists a crucial issue: What is the character of God? What is God really like? Is He the arbitrary tyrant that Satan makes Him out to be, or is He a loving and caring Father who wants only the best for us? These questions really are the most important questions in the entire cosmos. After all, what would our situation be if God were not kind and loving and self-sacrificial but mean and arbitrary and sadistic? We'd be better off if no God existed than to have one like that.

So, the questions are of huge importance. Fortunately, we have the answers, and they are best seen at the Cross.

“Never will it be forgotten that He whose power created and upheld the unnumbered worlds through the vast realms of space, the Beloved of God, the Majesty of heaven, He whom cherub and shining seraph delighted to adore—humbled Himself to uplift fallen man; that He bore the guilt and shame of sin, and the hiding of His Father's face, till the woes of a lost world broke His heart, and crushed out His life on Calvary's cross. That the Maker of all worlds, the Arbiter of all destinies, should lay aside His glory and humiliate Himself from love to man will ever excite the wonder and adoration of the universe.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 651.

How are the nature and character of God revealed in the following texts in Jeremiah? That is, what do these texts tell us about Him?

Jer. 2:13 _____

Jer. 5:22 _____

Jer. 11:22 _____

Jer. 31:3 _____

Jer. 3:7 _____

These are just a few of the many images and expressions used in the book that reveal to us something of the nature and character of our God. He is the Source of life, the powerful Creator, a God of judgment, a God who loves us and calls us, again and again, to repent of our sins and to turn away from the paths that will lead to our destruction.

What evidence of God's loving character have you experienced during your lifetime?

Rituals and Sin

“There is a document that records God’s endless, dispiriting struggle with organized religion, known as the Bible.”—Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (Yale University Press, 2010), Kindle Edition, p. 8.

Not quite true, and that’s because the religion of the Bible, the religion that God has given humanity, has always been an “organized religion.”

On the other hand, there is no question that in the book of Jeremiah, the Lord was seeking to get people away from the cold, dead, but very organized rituals that came to dominate their faith, rituals that they believed covered their sin.

As said earlier, yet it is worth repeating, the vast majority of Jeremiah’s struggles were with leaders and priests and people who believed that because they were the chosen ones of God, the children of Abraham, the covenant people, they were just fine with the Lord. What a sad deception, one that we, also of Abraham’s seed (*Gal. 3:29*), need to watch out for.

What is the message of the following texts in Jeremiah? Most important, how can we apply the principles there in our own walk with the Lord? (*Jer. 6:20, 7:1–10*).

Read Jeremiah 7:9, 10. If one ever wanted to find a situation that fits what has been called “cheap grace,” the term certainly applies here. The people do all these sinful things and *then come back to the temple and “worship” the true God and claim forgiveness for their sins*. God is not mocked. Unless these people change their ways, especially how they treat the weak among them, they are going to face harsh judgment.

What a deception they are under, the belief that they can claim God’s forgiveness and go on doing what they want, without regard to the conditions of the covenant so that they can continue on in those sins.

What is the difference between what Jeremiah is warning about here and what Jesus said in Matthew 9:12? Why is it important to know that difference?

Religion of the Heart

“So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God”
(Rom. 14:12).

So much of the book of Jeremiah is directed toward the nation as a whole. Time and again he talked about Israel and Judah corporately, as God’s “choice vine” (*Jer. 2:21, NIV*), or the “beloved” of the Lord (*Jer. 11:15, 12:7*), God’s own “heritage” (*Jer. 12:7–9*), His “vineyard” (*Jer. 12:10*), and His “flock” (*Jer. 13:17*). Without doubt, in the book we get a sense of the corporate nature of the Lord’s calling to this nation.

Of course, it’s the same in the New Testament, where time and again the church is understood in a corporate sense (*see Eph. 1:22, 3:10, 5:27*).

Yet, salvation is personal, not a corporate issue. We are not saved as package deals. As with the New Testament church, the nation of Judah was composed of individuals, and it’s here, at the level of the individual, that the real crucial issues arise. The famous text in Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (*NKJV*), though spoken to the nation as a whole, is written in the singular second person. That is, the “you” in each case is the singular; God is talking to each one individually. In the end, each one of us, personally, will have to give an account of ourselves to God.

We find that same thing in Jeremiah, as well.

What do the following texts say about the importance of a personal, individual walk with the Lord?

Jer. 17:7 _____

Jer. 17:10 _____

Jer. 29:13 _____

Jer. 9:23, 24 _____

Though both Testaments of the Bible talk about the corporate nature of God’s church, true faith is a matter of each person, himself or herself, making a daily surrender to the Lord, a personal choice to walk in faith and obedience.

Though there’s no question that we are each individually responsible for our own souls, how can we make sure that we are doing everything we can to uplift and encourage others? Whom do you know, right now, that you can say some kind and uplifting words to?

Twilight of the Idols

What was one of the great sins that the people committed that Jeremiah had to deal with constantly? (*Jer. 10:1–15*).

What's interesting in these texts is not just the way in which the prophet shows how vain and useless and silly these idols are but how he contrasts them to the living God. These things are powerless, useless, empty, and false; what a contrast to the Lord who made the heavens and earth! He will endure forever, while these idols will vanish forever. So, whom should we be worshiping and dedicating our lives to: that which is weak, false, vain, and powerless, or to the Lord, whose power and might are so great that He created and sustains the universe? The answer, of course, is obvious.

Yet, however obvious the answer, the fact is, we are in danger of falling into idolatry as well. Though today we might not worship the same kind of idols that those in Jeremiah's time did, our modern life is full of false gods. These modern idols can be anything that we love more than God; whatever we "worship" (and worship doesn't always mean singing and praying) becomes our god, and we are guilty of idolatry.

What are some of the things that we can be in danger of making into idols? What about things such as digital devices, money, fame, even other people? Make a list of what these potential idols are, and then ask yourself: In the end, what real salvation do they offer?

Of course, we know intellectually that none of these things is worthy of worship. We know that in the end, nothing that this world offers us, nothing that we make into idols, can ultimately satisfy our souls and certainly not redeem them. We know all these things, and yet, unless we are careful, unless we keep before us Jesus and what He did for us and why He did it, we can so easily be swept up in a modern form of the idolatry similar to that which Jeremiah so passionately railed against.

The Remnant

“In the closing years of Judah’s apostasy the exhortations of the prophets were seemingly of but little avail; and as the armies of the Chaldeans came for the third and last time to besiege Jerusalem, hope fled from every heart. Jeremiah predicted utter ruin; and it was because of his insistence on surrender that he had finally been thrown into prison. But God left not to hopeless despair the faithful remnant who were still in the city. Even while Jeremiah was kept under close surveillance by those who scorned his messages, there came to him fresh revelations concerning Heaven’s willingness to forgive and to save, which have been an unending source of comfort to the church of God from that day to this.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 466.

Even amid that prevailing apostasy and doom, God always had a faithful people, however small in number. Though as with many of the books of the prophets, much of the emphasis in Jeremiah was on apostasy and unfaithfulness—because these were what the Lord wanted to save the people from—all through sacred history the Lord had a faithful remnant. This, of course, will continue down until the end of time (see *Rev. 12:17*).

How is the concept of the remnant expressed in Jeremiah 23:1–8? How does this apply to New Testament times? (See also *Jer. 33:14–18*.)

In verses 5–7 scholars have long seen a Messianic prophecy, a prophecy of redemption for God’s faithful people. Though it’s true that, after the Babylonian exile, a remnant returned, it was not a glorious return. However, God’s purposes would be fulfilled through the lineage of David, through a “righteous Branch,” the King who would one day reign.

This prophecy had a partial fulfillment in the first coming of Jesus (see *Matt. 1:1, 21:7–9, John 12:13*). It will have its ultimate fulfillment in the Second Coming (see *Dan. 7:13, 14*), when all of God’s faithful people, His true remnant, will dwell forever in peace and safety. The redemption, first symbolized by the Exodus from Egypt, will be final, complete, and eternal.

In what are you putting your hopes? How can you learn to trust more and more in the promises of God and their ultimate fulfillment in your own life? What else besides them do you have?

Further Thought: Many years ago a Seventh-day Adventist minister named W. D. Frazee preached a sermon called “Winners and Losers.” In it he went through the lives of various Bible characters, looking at their work and ministry, and then he asked the question regarding each one: *Was he a winner or a loser?*

For example, he looked at John the Baptist, who lived a lonely life in the wilderness. Though eventually John had a small following, it never amounted to much, and certainly it was not what Jesus, who came later, had. And, of course, John lived out his last days in a dank prison where, at times, he was harassed with doubt, finally only to get his head chopped off (*Matthew 14*). After recounting all this, Elder Frazee asked: “Was John a winner or a loser?”

What about Jeremiah the prophet? How successful was his life? He suffered a great deal, and he wasn’t afraid to whine and moan about it either. With few exceptions, it seems that the priests, prophets, kings, and common people not only didn’t like what he had to say, but also thoroughly resented it. He was even seen as treasonous against his own people. In the end, the destruction and doom that he spent his life warning about came, because time and again the people rejected his words. They threw him into a muddy pit, hoping he’d die there. He lived to see his nation go into a terrible exile while Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. Thus, from a human perspective, not much went well for Jeremiah. From one perspective, you could argue that he had a fairly miserable life.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Was Jeremiah a winner or a loser? What are the reasons for the choice you make? If you say he was a winner, what does that tell us about how crucial it is that we not judge reality by the world’s standards? What standards are we to use to try to understand what is right and wrong, good and evil, success and failure?
- 2 In what ways do we see the life and ministry of Jesus prefigured in Jeremiah? What are the parallels?
- 3 Earlier this week we saw the problem of believing that going on with religious worship without a change of heart is a deception. What is true grace, in contrast to the cheap, worthless, and even deceptive version of it warned about here?

Now Is the Time

Debrah, a Seventh-day Adventist, missed her church fellowship after she married an unbeliever and moved with her husband to an area where there was no church.

After some years, a group of Adventist laymen calling themselves the “Now Is the Time” team decided to hold meetings in this area. The first night of the meetings, Debrah’s husband happened by and came in. Although he was very drunk, he realized that these meetings were being conducted by members of his wife’s church.

“Where have you been?” he demanded loudly. “My wife is a Seventh-day Adventist, and she has been waiting years for you to come!” One of the workers persuaded him to come outside where his drunken behavior would not interrupt the meeting. Finally, he asked for a Bible to take to his wife and set off for home, some distance away.

Meanwhile, Debrah had awakened from a vivid dream in which she had seen her husband entering the house with a Bible as a gift for her. She lay in the darkness, wondering what the dream meant. She knew it was unlikely that her husband would spend his money to buy her a Bible.

About 2:00 A.M. her husband came home and presented her with the Bible, just as she had dreamed. Thrilled over this sign of God’s care, she couldn’t go to sleep and finally decided to get up and find the place where the meetings were being held.

Arriving very early in the morning, Debrah found the preachers and studied earnestly with them. She decided that nothing would keep her from serving the God who had spoken to her in a dream.

Debrah’s husband was tolerant, but his parents were angry. They burned all of her clothes. When the evangelistic team gave her more clothes, they burned them too. When her husband’s parents realized that she would not forsake her religion, they threw Debrah out of the home and bought another wife for their son. But eventually, because of his unhappiness, they relented and reinstated Debrah as their son’s wife.

Although her husband was glad to have her back, he showed no interest in religion himself. But as Debrah worked hard to please him and make him comfortable, while also spending as much time as she could helping others, her beautiful Christian life made an impression on him, and he decided to become a Seventh-day Adventist. Today, he and Debrah work together to share God’s love.

Debrah and her husband live in an unspecified country in Africa.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Jeremiah 2:13, Deuteronomy 6:5, Jeremiah 23:1–8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify the main lessons of the book of Jeremiah, which are centered foremost on the character of God and our response to Him.

Feel: Appreciate the sobering implications of the remnant motif in the book of Jeremiah and the contrast between the “many” and the “few.”

Do: Embrace the concept of heart religion, which is the only way to true happiness and eternal life.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God’s Character

A What were the popular distortions of God’s character during the time of Jeremiah?

B Does the message of judgment—Jeremiah’s most prevalent message—imply an image of God as a stern judge who is out to get us? Why, or why not?

II. Feel: Only a Few

A What are the sobering implications of the remnant motif? How did it play out in Jeremiah?

B How is the remnant motif still relevant for today as we see the Seventh-day Adventist Church growing by leaps and bounds?

III. Do: Heart Religion

A Is heart religion a type of religious experience that is based on emotions?

B What would be the opposite of heart religion?

C How is heart religion lived out on a daily basis?

► **Summary:** As we look back on the book of Jeremiah, we see a theme running through the book that really is the center of the great controversy: God’s character and human misconceptions and misrepresentations of it. God wants our hearts and is not satisfied with anything less. We will not be satisfied with anything less either.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jeremiah 2:13*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The cost of discipleship is high. Jeremiah, throughout his life, faced tremendous hardships, all in order to proclaim God’s message and to portray a God who is the true “‘fountain of living waters’ ” (*Jer. 2:13, NKJV*), a God who reaches out in love to His people to draw them back to Him—again and again—and then once more.

Just for Teachers: Jeremiah prophesied for more than forty years to his people, first in Judah and then in Egypt. At various points in his life, he complained bitterly to God about his ministry and message (*Jer. 11:18–12:5, 15:10–18, 17:12–18, 18:19–23*), which finally led to his ultimate complaint in which he cursed the day of his birth (*20:14–18*). Yet, he continued to accompany Judah through its final days, which were marked by rebellion and destruction.

Although he could have opted out, he stuck with God’s people and even accompanied them into Egypt, where he died under unknown circumstances. He truly was one of the greatest prophets while, at the same time, so human. Discuss with the class the greatness of Jeremiah that shines through his humanity.

Opening Discussion: We all like happy endings. However, the story of Jeremiah is not ending well. Jerusalem is destroyed, Gedaliah brutally murdered, God’s prophet is once more ignored, the remaining Jews disappear with Jeremiah back to Egypt, and there the whole story just fades away amid syncretism and death.

Imagine a pastor who has preached a whole life’s worth of evangelistic sermons, who has always visited the members of the flock, and who has faithfully performed all pastoral duties—yet never baptizes a single soul. How discouraging! Or think of the endless number of missionaries who breathed out their lives in humid jungles without seeing any tangible results for their lifelong efforts.

The cost of discipleship is really not low. How do you react when the going gets tough in your Christian walk and when you face opposition from every conceivable angle?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: As we conclude this quarter’s lesson study, we

need to look at the overall picture that emerges from the study of the book of Jeremiah and how this fits within the even bigger picture of the great controversy. The book is really not just about the last days of Judah and messages of judgment but the character of God and how Satan has been successfully distorting God's character and, consequently, the divine image in us.

God's continuous attempts to draw His rebellious people back to Himself, which become almost painfully repetitive, show a God of love who reaches out again and again. And even when the call to repentance fails and the exile comes, the next message is restoration and the future hope of a remnant. These are really the big biblical themes that communicate the gospel in both the Old and New Testament.

Bible Commentary

Modern commentators usually see judgment at the center of the theological message of the book of Jeremiah. However, judgment is never a theological end in itself but always only a means to once more draw humankind close to its Creator. Judgment—as in sword, famine, and pestilence (a threefold curse that occurs about fifteen times in Jeremiah; *for example, Jer. 14:12, 21:7, 29:17*)—is never God's last word but salvation is (*compare especially Jer. 30–33, the so-called Book of Comfort*) and the promise of a remnant who will live out God's will for their lives.

I. The Character of God (*Review Jeremiah 2:11–13 with your class.*)

If the character of God is at stake in the great controversy, then Jeremiah makes it clear from the beginning of his book that Judah's rebellion is rooted in a distortion of God's character. Jeremiah 2:11–13 describes the center of Jeremiah's message: Judah (and Israel before them) had replaced God's glory for vanity (*vs. 11*). The Hebrew term *kabod* ("glory") in connection with God refers to His, at times, presence in the temple (*for example, Exod. 16:10*) and especially the filling of the temple, indicating God's desire to dwell among humanity and to fill us with His presence.

Israel (Judah) exchanged this tangible presence of God with ritual emptiness or the "fountain of living waters" with "broken cisterns." What a sorry exchange. Living water in the Bible is a Christological type (*compare Exod. 17:6*), as well as a strong metaphor of salvation (*compare John 4:10–14*), pointing to God's most inherent character traits. He wants to save us, sustain us, and fill us with His continuous presence. This is God as He reveals Himself through Jeremiah right from the outset of the book. Whatever we exchange Him for, we will always shortchange ourselves.

Consider This: God’s glory and the living water are powerful images in the Bible. What do these images mean for your Christian experience?

II. Ritual and Idols (*Review Jeremiah 6:20, 7:1–10, 10:1–14 with your class.*)

A formal religion that expresses itself in meaningless rituals goes hand in hand with idolatry and often coexists side by side with it in a strange symbiotic relationship. The threefold “The temple of the LORD” that Jeremiah quoted in the gate of the selfsame structure (*Jer. 7:4*) served as a vivid expression of this type of surrogate dry cistern religion.

The sheer presence of the temple was enough, it was thought, to function as a magic charm against the attacks of the Babylonians, and God had conveniently been enclosed inside this building so that one could invoke Him whenever necessary. It did not even matter that the personal lifestyle and ethical behavior were completely out of step with God’s law (*vss. 5–10*) and that idolatry was widespread (*10:1–9*) and even took place inside the temple (*compare Ezekiel 8*).

But all this is just dead religion, works-oriented, and in such stark contrast to the Living Water God who is the dynamic Creator-God. Once more the battle is about God’s character.

Consider This: Why would anybody in their right mind exchange the Living God with a lifeless idol? Why is this, sadly, not as inconceivable as we think?

III. Heart Religion and the Remnant (*Review Deuteronomy 6:4–6 and Jeremiah 23:1–8 with your class.*)

The *Shema Yisrael* (“Hear, O Israel”) is still the centerpiece of Jewish prayer services during the Sabbath, pointing to the importance of what follows, in Deuteronomy 6:5, as being the centerpiece of genuine worship. A personal and living God requires true heart religion and nothing less. This type of religion is based on a love relationship that involves all aspects of the person: the “heart” as the seat of thought and will; the “soul” (Hebrew *nephesh*), which refers to the whole person; and our “strength,” referring to the physical aspect.

True heart religion needs to be wholistic and genuine. It is as much a part of the Old as the New Testament, even though a few people suspect it to have its origins in the section of the Pentateuch called the second Decalogue, outlining the principles of the covenant (*Deut. 5:1–11:32*).

However, it seems to be always just a remnant that is drawn into such a love relationship with their God. Since the times of Noah, it has indeed always just been a remnant, and the promised remnant in Jeremiah that would return from Babylonian exile numbered only about fifty thousand people (*Neh. 7:66–73*). The Babylonian Talmud, one of the most important religious documents in

Rabbinic Judaism, originated in Babylon attesting to the large number of Jews who had comfortably settled in Mesopotamia and had made Babylon their home.

But beyond the exile there is the Messianic aspect of Jeremiah's prophecy that points to Christ as the King, whose name will be called "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (*Jer. 23:6, NKJV*), an appellation that was picked up by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:30. But even beyond Christ, the remnant motif points to the end of time when there will be an end-time church that will live out a true heart religion through accepting the "testimony of Jesus," which relates to salvation by grace and living a life of obedience to the "commandments of God" (*Rev. 12:17*). Jeremiah's message was a continuous invitation for our hearts to meet the heart of God.

Consider This: What is true heart religion for you?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: As this is the last lesson of this quarter, it would be important for the teacher to focus on broader applications of the whole book of Jeremiah.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ What has touched you most in the study of the book of Jeremiah during this quarter?
- ❷ What can you do in your church and community to promote true heart religion?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The book of Jeremiah is a moving story and should move us, as well. Often we are moved when we hear others sharing their experiences with God.

Class/Individual Activities:

Conclude this quarter's study with a group activity that provides time for testimonies on how people have experienced the great lessons of the book of Jeremiah. You could have a meal together (maybe include traditional Middle Eastern food such as falafel) and then open the floor to testimonies on the topics of faithfulness, obedience, true heart religion, listening to God's voice, revival and reformation, leaving behind idolatry and false religion and being part of the remnant church.



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