



FIRE IN THE BELLY

The Bittersweet Ministry of Jeremiah the Prophet

—A Bible Study by Stan Key—

Answers

*“...in him (Christ) all things hold together”
(Colossians 1:17).*

The Second Coming

by William Butler Yeats

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.*

*The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*



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FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

INTRODUCTION

I. Some historical information:

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began about 626 BC (the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah) and ended sometime after 586 BC (the year Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians). He was a **priest** as well as a **prophet** (ch. 1:1).

Jeremiah lived in what was perhaps the most difficult period Judah ever experienced. This was when the hegemony of the ancient world shifted as Assyria declined and Babylon ascended (Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC). This was when Jerusalem was besieged, destroyed and the population deported to Babylon. Jeremiah declared the **wrath** and **judgment** of God upon Judah for her rebellion in the hopes that she might repent and be saved. Little wonder that he is often called the "**weeping prophet**."

II. Outline and Structure.

A. The book is difficult to outline because its structure is fluid and things are not always placed in chronological sequence. A general outline of the book looks like this.

1. The call of the prophet (ch. 1).
2. Because of your sin, judgment is coming (chapters 2–29).
 - a. Spiritual adultery (ch. 2:1–4:4).
 - b. Disaster is coming (ch. 4:5–6:30).
 - c. The first Temple sermon (ch. 7:1–8:17).
 - d. A prophet's tears (ch. 8:18–9:26).
 - e. The folly of idolatry (ch. 10:1–25).
 - f. The broken covenant (ch. 11:1–23).
 - g. Jeremiah's complaint (ch. 12:1–17).
 - h. Can a leopard change his spots? (ch. 13:1–27).
 - i. "Don't pray for this people!" (ch. 14:1–22).
 - j. God is weary of showing mercy (ch. 15:1–21).
 - k. God sends a mixed message (ch. 16:1–21).
 - l. The deceitful heart (ch. 17:1–18).
 - m. Keep the Sabbath day holy (ch. 17:19–27).
 - n. The Potter and the clay (ch. 18:1–20:18).
 - o. A message to the kings of Judah (ch. 21:1–23:8).
 - p. False prophets (ch. 23:9–40).
 - q. Vision of two baskets of figs (ch. 24:1–10).
 - r. The Lion will roar (ch. 25:1–38).
 - s. The second Temple sermon (ch. 26:1–24).
 - t. The yoke sermon (ch. 27:1–28:17).
 - u. A letter to the exiles in Babylon (ch. 29:1–32).
3. Book of consolation (chapters 30–33).
 - a. God can cure the incurable (ch. 30:1–24).
 - b. The New Covenant (ch. 31:1–40).
 - c. Jeremiah buys a field (ch. 32:1–44).
 - d. "Call to me and I will answer you" (ch. 33:1–26).

4. The prophetic warnings are refused and judgment falls (chapters 34–45).
 - a. A proclamation of “liberty” (ch. 34:1–22).
 - b. The Rechabites (ch. 35:1–19).
 - c. Jehoiakim hears the words of the scroll and burns them (ch. 36:1–32).
 - d. Zedekiah asks, “Is there any word from the Lord?” (ch. 37:1–38:28).
 - e. The fall of Jerusalem (ch. 39:1–18).
 - f. Gedaliah is assassinated (ch. 40:1–41:18).
 - g. Do not go to Egypt (ch. 42:1–43:13).
 - h. Jeremiah’s sermon in Egypt (ch. 44:1–30).
 - i. Baruch the Magnificent (ch. 45:1–5).
 5. Judgment against all the nations (chapters 46–51).
 - a. On Egypt (ch. 46:1–28).
 - b. On the Philistines (ch. 47:1–7).
 - c. On Moab (ch. 48:1–47).
 - d. On Ammon (ch. 49:1–6).
 - e. On Edom (ch. 49:7–22).
 - f. On Damascus (ch. 49:23–27).
 - g. On Kedar and Hazor (ch. 49:28–33).
 - h. On Elam (ch. 49:34–39).
 - i. On Babylon (ch. 50:1–51:64).
 6. Historical appendix: the fall of Jerusalem (ch. 52).
- B. Some comments on the structure of the book.
1. The book contains several different literary genre.
 - Prophetic messages in poetic form.
 - Prophetic messages in prose.
 - Personal reflections of Jeremiah (his “**confessions**”).
 - Historical narratives (that include biographical information about Jeremiah).
 2. Chapter 1 serves as an **introduction** to the entire book.
 3. Chapters 30–33 are a dramatic **contrast** to the rest of the book.
 4. Chapter 52 seems to be a sort of **climax** to the entire book.
 5. There is a great deal of **repetition** in the book.
 6. The book does not follow an obvious chronological order.
 7. **Lamentations** is also attributed to Jeremiah and seems a fitting sequel.

III. Some of the major themes of the book.

- A. God is not mocked: we **reap** what we sow.
- B. True prophets and false prophets.
- C. The role of government (kings).
- D. The **inner struggle** of God: wrath or mercy? Can he “divorce” his bride even though she is a brazen adulteress?
- E. God is the Lord over *all* nations... not just Judah and Israel.
- F. The **emotional life** of saints.

- G. Worshiping idols is not only sinful... it is **stupid**.
- H. Nations that refuse to repent are doomed.
- I. Judgment comes in many different forms (enemy attacks, draught, disease, famine, etc.).
- J. Can **human nature** be changed?
- K. The ministry of **intercession**.
- L. How the New Covenant supersedes the Old Covenant.
- M. The tension that exists between divine **sovereignty** and human **responsibility**.
- N. Ultimately God's covenant faithfulness and mercy will triumph over his wrath. Beyond judgment comes restoration and renewal.
- O. Homesickness.
- P. How to survive and thrive in **Babylon**.

IV. Question of eternal significance.

- A. Who can understand the depth of **evil** in the human heart? (ch. 17:9–10).
- B. Can **human nature** be changed? (ch. 8:22; 13:23; 18:6).
- C. Is God really **good**? (ch. 15:18; Lam. 3:38–39).
- D. Why do the wicked **prosper**? (ch. 12:1).
- E. What does it mean to **know** God? (ch. 22:13–16).
- F. What is God's **word** like? (ch. 23:29).
- G. Do you seek **great things** for yourself? (ch. 45:5).
- H. Why was I **born**? (ch. 20:18).
- I. What is the **burden** of the Lord? (ch. 23:33).
- J. Is there any **word** from the Lord? (ch. 37:17).
- K. Where is God when things **fall apart**? (Lam. 5:20).

TABLE TALK

1. Do you find the book of Jeremiah to be depressing or a source of hope? Explain.
2. What do you think it felt like to live in a time of international uncertainty and national calamity?
3. What do you think it felt like to be called to minister in such a time?
4. How are the days of Jeremiah similar to the 21st century? How are they different?
5. As you look at the major themes (see III) and questions (see IV) in the book of Jeremiah, which theme or question most resonates with your current spiritual walk?

HAVE THINE OWN WAY, LORD

by Adelaid A. Pollard

*Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.*

*Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Search me and try me, Master, today!
Whiter than snow, Lord, wash me just now,
As in Thy presence humbly I bow.*

*Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Wounded and weary, help me, I pray!
Power, all power, surely is Thine!
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine.*

*Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me.*

GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS

by Thomas Obadiah Chisolm

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.*

*Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.*



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CHAPTER 1. THE CALL (JEREMIAH 1:1–19)

I. It's not about you.

Jeremiah ministered during the final days of Judah's existence as Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and the people carried into exile. The account of this traumatic and pivotal episode in history begins with a **teenager** receiving a **call** from God. God has a purpose for each of his children and he longs for us to understand what it is. We discover this purpose, however, only as we discover **it's not about me**. It's about *God* and *his purposes* for the world.

The great business of life is not for me to get God to do what I want but for him to get me to do what he wants! This requires a Copernican Revolution in our hearts. Copernicus (1473–1543) caused a mega paradigm shift in human history when he discovered that we live in a helio-centric solar system and not a geo-centric one. In a similar way, if we are to experience God's call on our lives, we must discover that life is meant to be **Christo-centric** rather than **ego-centric**.

II. Study the text (ch. 1:1–19).

A. The call (vv. 4–5).

Notice that God's call came to Jeremiah **before** he was born. If we look at the verbs we see the basic ingredients of a call.

1. **I formed you...** God thought of you first, even before your parents! You are no accident. God shaped you like a potter forms the clay (ch. 18:1–6). He planned your eye color, height, talents, looks, etc. (Psalm 139:13–16). Most importantly, God has a *plan* for your life.
2. **I knew you...** Perhaps the greatest of all human desires is to be known, acknowledged, recognized, and understood. "Mommy, look at me!" When we are known, our existence is **validated**. Long before Jeremiah knew God, God knew Jeremiah. In finding God's will, it is far more important that God knows me than that I know him.
3. **I consecrated you...** The word can be translated "sanctified" and means to be **set apart** for holy purposes. In the Bible numerous things are thus "set apart" for God: pots and pans in the temple, days of the year, prophets, priests, kings, etc. This means that *you are not your own, you have been bought with a price. So glorify God in your body* (I Cor. 6:19–20).
4. **I appointed you a prophet to the nations...** The word means "to give." God "gave" Jeremiah to the nations. God loves to give things away (John 3:16, etc.). If Jeremiah's life is truly consecrated to God, then God has every right to do whatever he wishes with him.

B. The excuses (ch. 1:6–10).

When the call came, Jeremiah did what almost everyone does in such a situation: he began to **make excuses**. In fact, one of the surest ways to know whether or not a calling is from God is this: if I think that I can handle it, then it is almost certainly not from God! God doesn't call the **qualified**, rather he qualifies the called.

Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth (ch. 1:6). Here we see two basic reasons why Jeremiah believed he was not the man for the job and that God has made a mistake:

1. I don't have the **ability/skills/talents/gifts**. I'm not qualified. I can't speak. Many in the Bible and in human history have tried this excuse.

God's answer: *Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth and said, "Behold, I have put **my words** in your mouth..."* (ch. 1:9). This may have begun with a supernatural touch, but it was deepened when Jeremiah learned to "eat" God's word for himself (see ch. 15:16).

2. I don't have the **experience**. I'm only a youth. I'm immature. I'm a B-team player being asked to play ball with the pros. No way! Note that Jeremiah's excuse was rooted not in rational thought but in **fear** (v. 8).

God's answer: Don't talk that way! *Do not say, "I am only a youth"... Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you* (v. 8).

- C. The job description (ch. 1:10).

*See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to **pluck up** and to **break down**, to **destroy** and to **overthrow**, to **build** and to **plant*** (ch. 1:10).

Notice:

- God has to break down before he can build. This means that Jeremiah must address the sin issue in the land before he can proclaim God's comfort. He must preach **repentance** before he promises salvation.
- Four verbs are negative, two are positive. This means that Jeremiah will probably spend **66%** of his time preaching judgment and **33%** preaching comfort.

- D. Two visions (ch. 1:11–16).

1. The **almond branch** (ch. 1:11–12). *I am watching over my word to perform it...* (v. 12). "Almond" sounds like the word for "watching."

The purpose of this vision is to **remind** Jeremiah that this is God's message, not Jeremiah's. This is not about you! It is about God and his word. What God promises, he will do; for blessing and for judgment.

2. The **boiling pot** (ch. 1:13–16). *Out of the north disaster shall be let loose...* (v. 14). Judgment is coming on Jerusalem from the north (Babylon). This will be hard and a dangerous ministry, Jeremiah but *dress yourself for work, arise...I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land... they will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you...* (vv. 17–19).

The purpose of this vision is to **reassure** Jeremiah that even though his ministry will meet with fierce opposition, God will fortify him so that he is equal to the task. *As your days, so shall your strength be* (Deut. 33:25).

III. Basic equipment for the prophetic office.

In the Bible the prophetic ministry is not so much about fore-telling the future as it is about **forth-telling** the Word of God. To accomplish this role, Jeremiah helps us to understand the basic equipment required.

- A. **Ears** to hear (ch. 1:2,4,11,13, etc. cf. Jer. 6:10–11). In the midst of all the verbal inflation of his day, Jeremiah discerned the Voice of the Lord.
- B. **Eyes** to see (ch. 1:11,13). In the midst of prosperity and even religious renewal, Jeremiah saw what no one else did: judgment was coming.
- C. A **mouth** to speak (ch. 1:9–10). Jeremiah’s words were not Jeremiah’s words. They were God’s words. And that gave them power!
- D. A **heart** to feel (ch. 4:19; 9:1; etc.). Anyone who “enjoys” being a prophet is not a true prophet!
- E. **Courage** (ch. 1:8, 18–19). Don’t be controlled by your fears.

God longs for **all** of his people to be “prophets” (Num. 11:29; Acts 2:17–18; I Cor. 14:1).

TABLE TALK

1. God knew you, formed you, and had a plan for your life *before* you were born or even conceived. Describe your thoughts and your feelings about this reality.
2. When a person prays that God will reveal his sovereign purpose for his life so that he might know his “life’s calling,” what is that person really asking?
3. Jeremiah needed to “destroy” before he could “build”, to preach repentance before he preached salvation. Is that how *you* heard the Gospel? Is that how you share it?
4. Is there a call from God on *your* life? Describe how you understand it.
5. Have you experienced a “Copernican revolution” in your soul?
6. Which part of the prophetic “equipment” is weakest in your life?



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CHAPTER 2. SPIRITUAL ADULTERY (JEREMIAH 2:1–4:4)

I. When the vow breaks.

A. Pastoral Competence.

A pastor is privy to many difficult life situations: unemployment, sickness, addictions, conflict, debt, grief, rebellious children, etc. But nothing is more difficult, more volatile, or has more far-reaching and long-lasting consequences than **marital unfaithfulness**. Such situations test pastoral competence at its deepest levels.

B. The heart of the matter.

The real issue in marital infidelity is not sex, though that may be the focus of everyone's attention! The real issue is **trust**. Vows have been broken. **Betrayal** has occurred. Adultery does to marriage what **treason** does to the nation. It is what Judas did to Jesus. In the traditional wedding ceremony, there are two sets of vows:

Vows made to **God**. You can be sure that he is listening (Malachi 2:13–14).

*To the man: Will you have this woman to be your wedded wife; to live together in the holy estate of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, **forsaking all others**, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live? (Then the same question is asked of the bride).*

Vows made to **one another**.

*I, _____, take thee, _____, to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my **faith/faithfulness**.*

When adultery occurs, it means that vows are **negotiable**, commitments can be **ignored**, promises can be **broken**, and **words** have no meaning. "Truth has perished" (ch. 7:28). When a marriage (a culture, a nation, or a church) reaches this point then things fall apart. The barbarians are at the gates.

C. Pastor Jeremiah mediates a very troubled marriage.

God and Israel made **covenant promises** to one another at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19–24; Jer. 31:31–32). They got married! (See Ex. 19:4–8; 24:3,7). Though God was faithful to his part of the covenant, Judah was not faithful to hers. She was an adulteress, having multiple lovers on multiple occasions. God had the same emotions all jilted lovers experience: **grief, hurt, shock, rage**, and **sense of betrayal**. Judah denied all wrong doing and refused to give up her lovers or change her ways. Jeremiah was called in to mediate the situation. Never has anyone had a more difficult pastoral challenge! Jeremiah's first sermon addressed this volatile situation head-on.

II. **Sermon #1. (Read ch. 2:1–5, 10–13, 20–28, 32–35a; 3:1–2, 6–13a, 22a; 4:1–4).**

A. Outline of the passage.

<i>God Remembers How wonderful were our first days together!</i>	<i>God Demands to Know Why What have I done that caused you to be unfaithful?</i>	<i>God Pleads Come Home! Return to Me! I will heal your backslidings.</i>
2:1 2:3	2:4 3:5	3:6 4:4

B. The situation is worse than you think.

Imagine being married to a **perfect** husband. Judah is married to God. He has never abused her or been unfaithful. He is not an alcoholic or a gambler. He is not emotionally detached. He has faithfully and lovingly provided, protected and nurtured Judah ever since their wedding day.

Imagine being married to a **prostitute, a slut!** Judah’s sin is no momentary lapse in judgment. Her adultery is not a one-night stand. Her behavior is not the result of coercion or seduction. No. Brazenly and repeatedly, she has turned her back on her Husband and slept with multiple lovers on many occasions. Many of her “lovers” didn’t even like her and yet *she* ran after *them!*

C. When we love anyone or anything more than God, when we allow our hearts to be captured by someone or something other than Jesus Christ, then we are potentially guilty of **spiritual adultery**. Let’s analyze and describe this sin because it lies at the root of what Jeremiah is addressing and explains why judgment is coming:

1. It is an **ugly** sin. Though Hollywood glamorizes “affairs” and makes them appear beautiful and exciting, the Bible is much more realistic. Like a donkey in heat sniffing the wind (ch. 2:24), Judah pursues partners who don’t even love her. There is nothing pretty about liars, betrayers, back-stabbers and traitors. There is nothing attractive about behavior that destroys families, hurts children, and leaves **wreckage** everywhere.
2. It is a **progressive** sin. No one sits down and says, “One day, I want to become an adulterer!” Marital unfaithfulness normally begins with an “innocent” look of the eye, a touch of the hand, a tone in the voice. A line is crossed and if we don’t pull back, it is inevitable that we will topple into the abyss, trapped in a cycle of behaviors that we cannot control. At some point, the adulterer reaches the **point of no return**.
3. It is a **stupid** sin. Adultery is not only sinful, it is really dumb! It’s like drinking salt water: the more you drink the thirstier you become! It makes as much sense as filling your car’s unleaded gas tank with diesel fuel. It simply won’t get you where you want to go! *You went after worthlessness and became **worthless*** (ch. 2:5). *For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water* (ch. 2:13).
4. It is a **numbing** sin. At first, the guilt from adultery is almost unbearable. But over time, one becomes habituated to such activity. Living in denial, one reaches the point that he/she actually believes they are living a good, moral life. “I’m not unclean” (ch. 2:23). “I am innocent...I have not sinned” (ch. 2:35). When our consciences are seared (I Timothy 4:2) so that we no longer respond to its directives, then things fall apart and judgment is near. *Were they*

*ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to **blush** (ch. 6:15).*

Conclusion: The word that describes this adulterous behavior is “**backsliding**” (ch. 2:19; 3:22; 5:6; 7:24; 8:5; 14:7; 15:6). When we begin to turn from God and listen to other voices and other lovers, we step onto a **slippery slope** whose end is destruction.

- D. In the Bible, adultery is grounds for **divorce**. The Mosaic law is crystal clear that if a man divorces his wife and she then marries someone else, he cannot remarry her (Deut. 24:1–4; Jer. 3:1). God had already divorced the ten tribes of the northern kingdom (Jer. 3:6–10) and now it appears he is ready to divorce the kingdom of Judah as well. He has grounds to do so! And yet, though divorce is permitted it is not mandatory. If there is true **repentance** and if there is true **forgiveness**, sometimes a broken marriage covenant can be healed. Jeremiah helps us to see the inner turmoil within the nature of God as He wrestles with what to do with his bride who has been unfaithful (ch. 3:6–14; 15:1–6; 31:20).

III. Can the marriage be saved? Can God heal a wayward heart?

Jeremiah 3:22 gives what is perhaps the most succinct statement of the Gospel according to Jeremiah: *Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness* (backslidings). Here we understand that there are two parts to salvation:

- A. Our part is to **return**. Stop resisting the love of God and give up our idols. In ch. 4:3 we are told to “break up your fallow ground”. In other words, we are to open our hearts (like soil) so the seed of God’s Word can be implanted there. Our part is not so much to *do* something as to *stop doing* something so we can **receive** something.
- B. God’s part is to **heal** our wayward hearts. Yes, our hearts are “deceitful above all things and desperately sick” (ch. 17:9). But God can give us a new heart (ch. 31:31–34). See James 4:4–10.

*O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it! prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, Lord, take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.
(Robert Robinson, 1735–1790).*

TABLE TALK

1. If you have ever known someone who experienced the consequences of adultery, describe what happened.
2. What happened to the ten “lost tribes” of Israel? Did God really “divorce” them? Is it possible to fall from grace?
3. When it comes to persistent sinning, how do you understand the concept of the point of no return? When is that point reached?
4. Have you ever thought of God having a moral dilemma? Should he send judge and condemn or should he forgive and restore? What does this do to your concept of God?
5. Can god really transform a human heart?

Depth of Mercy¹

By Charles Wesley

(Sung to the tune of “Jesus Lover of My Soul”)

*Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear –
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?
I have long withstood His grace,
Long provoked Him to His face,
Would not hearken to His calls,
Grieved Him by a thousand falls.*

*I my Master have denied,
I afresh have crucified,
And profaned His hallowed Name,
Put Him to an open shame.
If I rightly read Thy heart,
If Thou all compassion art,
Bow Thine ear, in mercy bow,
Pardon and accept me now.*

*Now incline me to repent;
Let me now my sins lament;
Now my foul revolt deplore,
Weep, believe, and sin no more.
There for me my Savior stands,
Holding forth His wounded hands;
God is love ! I know, I feel,
Jesus weeps and loves me still.*

¹ This hymn was first published in 1740 in *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. In that hymnal it had the title “After a Relapse into Sin.” In a later hymnal (1780) it was included in a section of hymns headed “For Mourners Convinced of Backsliding.” These designations help us to better understand the meaning and purpose of the text. Though the Wesleys passionately preached the blessed assurance of sins forgiven, they recognized that falling from grace remained a real possibility throughout this life. One might note in passing that for many in the Wesleyan tradition, falling from grace is not only a doctrine we believe and preach, it is one we practice!

In a letter to Joseph Bradford written when John Wesley was 80 years old, the aged saint reflected on his own spiritual journey:

...have been reflecting on my past life; I have been wandering up and down between fifty and sixty years, endeavoring in my poor way to do a little good to my fellow-creatures.... And what have I to trust to for salvation? I can see nothing which I have done or suffered that will bear looking at. I have no other plea than this:

*I the chief of sinners am,
But Jesus died for me.*



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 3. TOXIC CHURCH (JEREMIAH 7:1–8:17)

I. Introduction

Where is the riskiest place you can be to catch a life-threatening infection? In a jungle? a crowded city? a kindergarten classroom? No. The place one is most likely to catch a deadly disease is in the **hospital**. Estimates indicate that each year nearly two million patients catch an infection while they are in the hospital that is unrelated to the reason they came to the hospital in the first place! 99,000 of these people actually die.¹

Where is the riskiest place you can be to catch a soul-threatening spiritual infection? Las Vegas? Wall Street? Harvard? Try again. The place where one is most likely to catch a deadly spiritual infection is **in church**. It is possible to catch a spiritual disease in church that is more deadly than the sin that brought you there in the first place! Jeremiah preached an important sermon to address the reality of **toxicity** in the temple of God.

II. The Temple Sermon: Amend your ways! (ch. 7:1–8:17).

A. Setting, theme and warning of the sermon (Read ch. 7:1–7).

1. The *setting*: “in the gate of the Lord’s house” (v. 2). As people arrived for worship, they encountered the prophet standing in the door of the temple, **warning** them about the dangers lurking inside!
2. The *theme*: “Amend your ways and your deeds...” (v. 3). Jeremiah’s **first words** set the tone for all that followed.
3. The *warning*: “Do not trust in these **deceptive words**: This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” (v. 4). In those days, as in ours, worship involved repeating phrases over and over: “Peace, Peace” (ch. 6:14; 8:11), “I have dreamed, I have dreamed” (ch. 23:25), “Lord, Lord” (Matt. 7:21). Don’t confuse trusting in the temple of the Lord with trusting in the Lord of the temple! Jeremiah is warning against **false assurance**.

B. Hiding from God (Read ch. 7:8–15).

1. The worshipers were brazenly breaking the Ten Commandments (v. 9) and then coming to the temple as if there was no connection between moral behavior and worship. Jeremiah wanted them to understand that one simply cannot worship a **holy** God and live an **unholy** life!
2. These people came to church like robbers go to their den (v. 11): to **hide**. Though worship ought to be a place where the light of God exposes our sin so we can repent and be forgiven, in Jeremiah’s day it had become a place for people to live out a lie... **comfortably**. Little wonder that Jesus was thinking of this sermon when he cleansed the temple 600 years later (Mark 11:17).
3. Jeremiah urged the worshipers to take a field trip to **Shiloh** (vv. 12–15). Though the tabernacle once was there, it now is only a ruin because of people who worshiped there like you are doing here. Be warned!

¹ These diseases are called Hospital-Acquired Infections (HAI), or in medical parlance, nosocomial infections.

- C. God tells Jeremiah not even to **pray** for these people “for I will not hear you” (ch. 7:16).
- D. What God really wants is not your “worship” but your **obedience** (ch. 7:22–23).
- E. God has sent prophets over and over again to warn you, but you refuse to listen (ch. 7:25–26). The result is this: **truth has perished** and now you are “the generation of his wrath” (ch. 7:28–29).
- F. Jeremiah mentions two of their more prominent sins to explain why God is so upset: 1) you worship idols **in** the temple (7:30), and 2) you practice **child sacrifice** (ch. 7:31).
- G. Yet you continue to say, “We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us” (ch. 8:8). When people worship falsely the result is always **self-deception** (Matt. 7:21–23).
- H. All the prophets and the priests “deal falsely” (ch. 8:10–11). They offer healing that is no healing at all. Their message is “Peace, peace”.... But there is no peace. This is **clergy malpractice** of the worst kind (see III, E)!

III. Characteristics of a toxic church.

- A. Words divorced from **truth** (ch. 7:4,8; 8:5,8; see 23:16–17, 21–22).

In a toxic church, “deceptive words” are both preached by the clergy and believed by the people. It is not that the words are “wrong” but they are misleading. “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord...” “Peace, peace...”

*An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people **love to have it so**, but what will you do when the end comes? (ch. 5:30–31).*

In such an environment the very concept of truth **dies** (ch. 7:28)! There are no moral absolutes. Preachers think their job is to make people happy rather than **holy**, to reassure people in their sins rather than save them **from** their sins, to reflect public opinion rather than shape it. “Peace, peace!” Jeremiah reminds us that sometimes a pastor’s job is not to comfort the afflicted but rather to **afflict** the comfortable!

- B. Worship divorced from **obedience** (ch. 7:8–10; 8:12).

In a toxic church, people may have intense worship experiences and yet live in willful and habitual sin. Church is a place **to hide**. Sunday has no relation to Monday.

*I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take **no delight** in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... Take away from the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21–24).*

It is time for the church to stop trying to **entertain the goats** and get back to feeding the sheep!

- C. Life divorced from **reality** (ch. 7:28; 8:10–11)

When truth perishes because the pulpits are filled with people-pleasers rather than prophets of God, then people begin to live in **la-la-land**. Though things are falling apart and the Babylonians are at the gates, people go to church and say “Amen!” when the preacher says, “Peace, peace!” They believe that they are right with God even though they are living like the devil (ch. 8:8). Irrationality is the result.

D. **Clergy** malpractice.

There were many popular prophets in Jeremiah's day: Pashhur (ch. 20:1–6), Hananiah (ch. 28:1–17), Ahab, Zedekiah, Shemaiah (ch. 29:21–32), etc. Jeremiah labored to help the people **distinguish** the true shepherds from the false. This is not easy (Matt. 7:15; II Cor. 11:14–15). Jeremiah emphasized two criteria:

1. The **character** of the prophet (ch. 8:10; 23:11, 14–15; 29:21–23; etc.). Two temptations seemed to have almost irresistible power over the clergy in Jeremiah's day even as in ours: **money** and **sex**. Orthodoxy in doctrine is never an excuse for immorality in practice. Hypocrisy in the pulpit gives license to moral chaos in the nation.
 2. The **content** of the message (ch. 7:4,8,28; 8:10–12; 14:13–16; 23:16–22; 28:1–17; etc.). Many of these false prophets were actually "good preachers!" But note especially the **source** and the content of the message they preached.
 - a. They **made it up** in their own heads. They did not receive it from God although they claimed they did (ch. 23:14–30).
 - b. They gave **false assurance** and security saying all was well when in reality judgment was coming (ch. 14:13–16; 23:16–17; 28:1–17).
 - c. Notice how they loved **repetitions** to reinforce the prosperity theology they were preaching: "Peace, peace" (ch. 6:14; 8:11), "This is the temple of the Lord" (3X) (ch. 7:4), "I have dreamed, I have dreamed" (ch. 23:25).
 - d. Their words were like straw, not **wheat**, or **fire** or a **hammer** (ch. 23:28–29).
 - e. They were guilty of **plagiarism** (ch. 23:30).
 - f. This meant that these prophets were worse than the prophets of Baal in Samaria (ch. 23:13–14). A **half-truth** is more dangerous than a lie!
- E. A toxic church **doesn't know** it is a toxic church (ch. 8:8,12).

The most dangerous hospital is not the one with germs lurking in the building but rather the one that *doesn't know* it has germs lurking in the building! Ignorance can be **fatal**. The reason sins in church are so deadly is not because they are worse than sins outside, but because they are usually **denied**. Self-deception is the most deadly form of deception because deceived people don't know they are deceived. *The heart is **deceitful** above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?* (ch. 17:9). Jeremiah wanted to shake people awake and help them see their true condition.

TABLE TALK

1. Describe someone you know who caught a disease at church that was more serious than the disease that brought him/her to church in the first place.
2. Have you ever been on the receiving end of clergy malpractice? Describe what happened.
3. Have you ever thought of church as a place for people to hide from the truth and live a lie? Have you ever known such a church?
4. Look again at the five characteristics of a toxic church. Which characteristic best describes the toxicity that may be present in your present church community?



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 4. WHY OH WHY? (JEREMIAH 12)

I. The Most Difficult Question.

A. Why pain?

Whether we are confronted with natural disasters, disease, random violence, accidents, war, poverty, famine, birth defects or some other human tragedy, every human being at some point in life is confronted with the question **Why?** Different responses to this question have been proposed through the centuries. Imagine how counselors from different religions or philosophies might seek to “comfort” someone facing terrible suffering.

1. *Hinduism.* Bad things happen because of bad **karma**. Perhaps in a previous existence you did something bad to merit these tragic consequences.
2. *Buddhism.* All existence is suffering. We suffer because our **desires** become attached to certain objects or people. Thus when we lose these things we hurt. Therefore, if you will just snuff out these desires you will cease suffering.
3. *Islam.* Everything that happens is directly caused by Allah. Therefore, **submit** to the will of Allah and you will find peace.
4. *Atheistic Darwinism.* This is how the **law of the jungle** works; nature is red in tooth and claw. The strong survive.
5. *Hedonistic secularism.* Get over it and **move on**.

B. For Christians especially this question is problematic.

Christianity asserts two basic beliefs about God: 1) he is absolute in **goodness**, and 2) he is absolute in **power**. So if something bad happens, you are confronted with a dilemma:

- Either God *could* do something if only he *would*; he is powerful but not good.
- Or God *would* do something if only he *could*; he is good but not powerful.

Thus, when suffering comes to the Christian, he/she must deal not only with the pain and loss of what has happened. More profoundly, they have to deal with the existential question *Why? **Where is God?*** Seeking an answer to this question is often as traumatic as dealing with the catastrophe itself! Many, in fact, have fallen into despair and depression and some into unbelief. This has led some to call suffering “the rock of atheism.”

II. Jeremiah 12.

A. Outline of the chapter (note reference to “planting” and “plucking up”; see ch. 1:10).

Jeremiah questions God 1–4	God questions Jeremiah 5–6	God will indeed punish Judah 7–13	But any nation that repents can find mercy with God 14–17
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1. Jeremiah questions God (vv. 1–4).

Though God is the righteous judge, Jeremiah has the boldness to come before him with a complaint: **Why** does the way of the wicked prosper? **Why** do all who are treacherous thrive? (v. 1). God has planted them and enabled them to prosper! Didn’t God tell me that he was going to uproot them (ch. 1:10)? And what about Psalm 1:1–4? Lord, this is all backward! It’s not supposed to be like this! **How long?** (v. 4). It’s as if Jeremiah is ready to take God to court and press charges against him for not fulfilling his promises!

2. God Questions Jeremiah (vv. 5–6).

God answers Jeremiah’s question with a question: *If you have raced with men on foot, and they have worn you out, how can you compete with **horses**? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?* (NIV). But how does this answer Jeremiah’s question? Basically God seems to be saying this: “Jeremy, you’re just a little man asking questions that are way over your head. You’re not in charge of this universe, I am. So **get over it!**”

3. God will indeed punish Judah (vv. 7–13).

God underscores for Jeremiah that he has “forsaken” and “abandoned” the nation of Judah (v. 7). Though she is the “beloved of my soul” God now “hates” her (vv. 7–8). Judah is going to be surrounded by a pack of hungry hyenas (v. 9). There is (apparently) nothing Jeremiah can do to **change** God’s plan.

4. But any nation that repents can find mercy with God (vv. 14–17).

God promises to “again have compassion” upon any nation (Judah included) that **repents**. Even if he has plucked them up he will build them up again.

III. Four Clues to the Meaning of Suffering.

This passage helps us to cope with life’s disappointments and especially with those occasions when God just doesn’t make sense! Though the Bible does not give us a “solution” to the problem of pain, it does give us at least four clues to the meaning of suffering.

A. Our real struggle in life is with **God**.

When things fall apart, it is tempting to blame the false prophets, the corrupt government leaders or the Babylonians (secular humanists, democrats, Hollywood, the economy, etc.). Jeremiah clearly understands that his real issue is not with any of these, but with God! *I would speak with you about your **justice*** (ch. 12:1 NIV). Jacob made the same discovery when he had his famous wrestling match with God, which he “won” by losing (Gen. 32:22–32). To get victory over life’s disappointments we must ultimately go to the *source* of our problem: God himself.

B. It's OK to tell God what you're **really feeling**.

Chapter 12 is not the only place where Jeremiahs speaks candidly to God: *Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?* (ch. 15:18). *O Lord, you have **deceived** me, and I was deceived...* (ch. 20:7). Theologians like to say that Jeremiah is struggling with theodicy. But frankly, to me it sounds like he is **belly-aching**. He is not seeking information; he is making an accusation! Other places in Scripture give other examples: Psalm 73; Habakkuk 1:2–3; Matthew 11:2–3; John 6:66–71; Mark 15:34. Yes, there is a wrong way to “complain” to God but these examples reveal that the Bible gives us **permission** to pour out our hearts to God and tell him what we really think.

C. Be warned: when you get **candid** with God, he will get candid with you!

If you belly-ache with God, he may just belly-ache back to you! God has **emotions** too! When Jeremiah complains to God about the way God is running the universe (!), God responds by asking Jeremiah if he is ready to race in the **Kentucky Derby** (v. 5). In other words, God seems irritated by Jeremiah's question and snaps back: “You think it's tough now? You ain't seen nothin' yet! Until now you've only had to deal with a few false prophets and dishonest politicians. But wait until the Babylonians get here!” This is similar to the answer that God gave to Job after listening to Job belly-ache for 37 chapters (ch. 38:1–42:6. See especially 38:1–5; 40:1–6; 42:1–6).

D. It ain't over till **the fat lady sings/Gabriel blows his trumpet**.

Yes, it is OK to belly-ache to God and pour out your complaints before him... but it not OK to **stay there!** Transparent honesty with God is meant to help get the **poison** of bitterness out of your system! The whole point of such frank conversation (prayer) is to enable us to finally arrive at a place of deep, quiet **trust**. God is in control. He knows what he is doing. God is good all the time. So, I'll wait upon him and trust in his promises... regardless of the disaster all around me.

IV. Responding Rightly to When Things Fall Apart.

The Gospel is God's **final answer** to the problem of pain. Jesus solved the problem of suffering by doing three things:

- A. He **came**. He is Emmanuel, God with us. He is not some distant deity on some ivory throne, uninvolved in the hard realities of human existence. Corrie Ten Boom discovered that even in a Nazi concentration camp, “No matter how deep our darkness, he is **deeper still**.”
- B. He **suffered**. The legitimacy of his birth was questioned. He was a refugee. He was poor and hungry and had no place to lay his head. He was rejected by his family and hated by his own people. He was victimized and slandered, stripped, terrorized, tortured and killed unjustly. No one can look at God and say, “You wouldn't understand.” He solved the problem of suffering by **suffering**.
- C. He **rose from the dead**. With Jesus, suffering and death do not have the **last word!** Those who are “in Christ” have already been raised with him and are even now seated with him in heavenly places (Col. 3:1–3; etc.). His suffering transforms all suffering. In Christ we discover that suffering is in reality only **labor pains** (Rom. 8:22–23). *In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel. (Teresa of Avila).*

The Thorn

by Martha Snell Nicholson

*I stood a mendicant¹ of God before His royal throne
And begged him for one priceless gift, which I could call my own.
I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart
I cried, "But Lord this is a thorn and it has pierced my heart.
This is a strange, a hurtful gift, which Thou hast given me."
He said, "My child, I give good gifts and gave My best to thee."
I took it home and though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore,
As long years passed I learned at last to love it more and more.
I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace,
He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face.*

TABLE TALK

1. Share with your group what touched you most in the lesson today.
2. Think about the prayer meetings you attend. Do people have freedom to talk candidly with God about what they really think and feel? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever been disappointed with God? How did you respond? Did the experience make your faith stronger or perhaps weaker?
4. Is suffering a problem to be solved or is it a mystery to be embraced?
5. How does the cross help us deal with our suffering?

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

by William Cowper

*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs and works His sov'reign will.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow'r.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.*

¹ Beggar.



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 5. THE POTTER AND THE CLAY (JEREMIAH 18–20)

I. Introduction

- A. Two stories.
 1. The Calvinist who had a dream (imaginary and funny).
 2. Parishioner to pastor (real and not funny): “One thing we can know for sure: **whatever happens is the will of God.**”
- B. The topic of this lesson.
 1. The theme of this lesson is the tension that exists between divine **sovereignty** and personal **responsibility**, between God’s providential purposes (eternal and immutable) and man’s (apparent) freedom of choice. Reconciling these polarities at both an intellectual and an experiential level is one of our greatest and most difficult challenges in life.
 2. This lesson suggests that Jeremiah 18–20 is perhaps the greatest text in the Bible to help us understand one of life’s deepest mysteries. This is Jeremiah’s most famous sermon. Note that it is more visual (actions, illustrations) than verbal. Even a child can understand it. And yet theologians are still plumbing the depths of its truth. It is profoundly **simple** and simply **profound**.
- C. The outline of the passage suggests a two-point sermon with a response:
 1. Point #1—Wet Clay (Chapter 18)
 2. Point #2—Dry Clay (Chapter 19)
 3. Response to the Sermon (Chapter 20)

II. Examining the text.

Though the events of chapters 18–20 are scattered over an unspecified period of time, the compiler of this passage (Baruch?) saw these three chapters as a single unit. The sermon is composed not only of words but of illustrative actions and object lessons. This is what made it so **powerful** as well as **memorable**.

The theme of the prophet’s message is this: God is the **potter** and Israel (you!) is the **clay**. Why then can’t he make a vessel with which he is well pleased?! Answering this question takes us to the heart of the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Perhaps more than any other sermon Jeremiah ever preached, this sermon provoked a strong **reaction**: from the people, from Jeremiah, and even from God.

- A. Chapter 18. First point: what God can do with **wet** clay.
 1. The sermon (vv. 1–11).
 - a. The sermon is primarily **non-verbal**. It is a visual object lesson.
 - b. The potter begins to work, decides things are not quite right, so begins again.
 - c. The question: Can’t God do with Israel what the potter does with the clay?

- d. The lesson (vv. 7–11). The key word is **“if”**.
 - *If* God chooses to **destroy** a nation because of its sin and **if** that nation *repents* of its sins, then God may change his plans (repent).
 - *If* God chooses to **bless** a nation and **if** that nation *does evil* and *refuses to listen* to God, then God may change his plans (repent).
 - NOW HEAR THIS, O Israel: God is about to destroy you! (hint, hint).
2. The people’s response (vv. 12, 18). We will follow our own plans! We **won’t listen** to this sermon anymore!
3. God’s response to the people (vv. 13–17). “Ask among the nations, who has heard the like of this?... Therefore I will scatter them before the enemy...”
4. Jeremiah’s response (vv. 19–23). He prays: “Lord, **help!** Hear what my listeners are plotting against me.”

NOTE: When a preacher confronts his congregation with the truth of God’s sovereign plan *and* our human capacity to thwart it... the people are likely to get very agitated! When people are made to understand how God is holding them personally accountable for his work in the world... there will usually be either a **riot** or a **revival**.

B. Chapter 19. Second point: what God does with **dry** clay.

1. Buy a flask and go to Ge-Hinnom (vv. 1–2). A flask is a clay vessel that has hardened into a shape that is **permanent**. The Potsherd Gate was where broken pottery was thrown out (town dump). The Valley (*ge* in Hebrew) of Hinnom (root of Greek word Gehenna) was the place where child sacrifice was practiced (see ch. 7:31; 32:35).
2. Preach your sermon (vv. 3–9). Announce the reality of coming **judgment** on the nation (but remember the “if” statements of ch. 18:7–11). He enumerates the sins that have provoked God to send such calamity:
 - They have forsaken God (v. 4).
 - They worship other gods (v. 4).
 - They kill innocent people (v. 4).
 - The practice child-sacrifice (v. 5).
3. Break the flask (vv. 10–15). God tells Jeremiah to **illustrate** the message he has just preached by throwing the flask down and breaking it so everyone can see.

*Thus says the Lord, “So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can **never** be mended... I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, **refusing** to hear my words.” (vv. 11, 15).*

NOTE: When clay **hardens** into a shape the potter never intended, there is nothing to be done except destroy it. But remember: every announcement of judgment, even when it sounds final and irreversible, is really **an invitation** to repent so that disaster is averted (ch. 18:7–11).

C. Chapter 20. The response to the sermon.

1. Jeremiah is beaten and put in stocks (vv. 1–6).

When Pashhur (a priest and the “chief officer in the house of the Lord”) heard Jeremiah’s sermon, he was so **upset** he beat him and put in stocks! But rather than backing down and softening his message, Jeremiah made it even stronger!

And you Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die... you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely. (v. 6).

2. Jeremiah **wrestles with God** in prayer (vv. 7–18). He had obeyed God and preached what he was told and the reward for such faithful service was rejection, ridicule and persecution. In the privacy of prayer, Jeremiah talked this out with God.
 - “O Lord, you have **deceived** me, and I was deceived... “ (v. 7).
 - “I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me...” (v. 7).
 - But if I try to stop preaching, I can’t! “There is in my heart a **burning fire** shut up in my bones, and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot.” (v. 9).
 - “Cursed be the day on which I was born!... Why did I come out of the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?” (vv. 14, 18).

NOTE: It sounds like Jeremiah is suffering from **depression**. He knew the promises of God. But his life experiences (rejection, persecution, judgment on Jerusalem, etc.) did not **fit his theology**. The book of Jeremiah contains several examples of his “confessions” (ch. 4:10; 12:1–4; 15:10–21; 20:7–18). Little wonder that he is often called “the weeping prophet.”

Jeremiah is not the only one who talked candidly to God like this. (Psalm 73; Habakkuk 1:2–3; Matthew 11:2–3; John 6:66–71; Mark 15:34).

I will now tell you my most terrible secret. I get very mad at God sometimes, especially when he lets me get hurt. In fact, I will let a million cats out of the bag. I will tell all the doubters and unbelievers who are reading this book a terrible secret most Christians do not tell: I think almost every believing Christian... gets mad at God sometimes. This is a pretty well-kept secret, especially among evangelicals and fundamentalists. I confess it not to cause scandal or to help the cause of unbelief but simply because it is true... (Peter Kreeft. Making Sense Out of Suffering. p. 12).

III. Summarizing the sermon.

- A. The Potter has a **plan**.

Before he even begins to work, the potter has a **mental image** of what he wants to create. It is amazing what a potter can do with **dirt** and **water**! The potter has a purpose for the vessel he is making (function) but he also intends that the finished product be a thing of beauty (art). Because Jeremiah knew that he had been “formed” for a purpose (ch. 1:5), he knew that God had purposes for other vessels too. Do you know God’s plan for your life?

*For we are his workmanship (Greek, poiema), created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared **beforehand**, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:10).*

B. The Potter has a **problem**.

The potter discovered that the clay was “spoiled” (ch. 18:4). The vessel wasn’t turning out as he had hoped. So, he scooped up the clay, added more water, and started again. So why can’t God do that with us? But note it well: there is a major difference between clay and humans:

- Clay is passive and malleable.
- Humans have a **will of their own!** (ch. 18:12, Rom. 9:20–21; etc.).

C. The Potter has a **question**. *Can I not do with you as this potter has done?* (ch. 18:6).

Does God not know the answer to his question!? Yes, God is **sovereign** (he chose the clay, he has a predestined plan, he has power over the clay, etc.). But the clay has to **co-operate** with what the potter is doing.

If you are hardening into a shape God never intended, quick, before it is too late:

1. Get back on the **Potter’s wheel** (Rom. 12:1–2).
2. Ask God to **add water** (Holy Spirit) to the lump of dirt you are.
3. **Surrender** to his purposes for your life.
4. Let God begin again to **re-form** you into the vessel he desires (function and beauty).

TABLE TALK

1. Share some personal experiences that helped you to understand the difficulty of reconciling the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.
2. Has Jeremiah’s sermon helped you to clarify your theology of divine sovereignty and human responsibility? Or has it deepened the mystery?
3. In ministry to others, should we emphasize God’s sovereign, unchangeable plan or man’s capacity to thwart the purposes of God? Explain your answer.
4. In 20:7–18 Jeremiah sounds angry (disappointed? confused? depressed?) at God. Have you ever had these feelings? Do you have a theology that permits you to talk candidly with God like this?
5. Does this study shed light on the “unforgiveable sin” that Jesus spoke of? At what points does a person harden into a shape that is irredeemable?
6. What is God’s purpose for your life? Is that purpose being realized? Why or why not?



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 6. JESUS FOR PRESIDENT (JEREMIAH 21:1–23:8)

I. A Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.

- A. *Justice for all.* Everywhere we turn, we find people debating what is **right** and what is **wrong**. It's almost as if this cry for justice, fairness and equality is written into our genetic code! Whether in a courtroom, congress, the workplace, talk radio, the family dinner table or the school playground, the cry for justice won't go away.
- B. *C. S. Lewis.* The first chapter of Lewis' classic book *Mere Christianity* is entitled "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." What may be the most important apologetic work of the 20th century, begins like this:

Everyone has heard people quarrelling... I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?" – "That's my seat, I was there first" – "Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm" – "Why should you shove in first?" – "Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.

Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behavior does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man seldom replies: "Forget about your standard." Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse...

...Now if we are agreed about that, I go on to my next point, which is this. None of us are really keeping the Law of Nature... I am only trying to call attention to a fact; the fact that this year, or this month, or, more likely, this very day, we have failed to practice ourselves the kind of behavior we expect from other people...

*These then, are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They **know the Law of Nature**; they **break** it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.*

- C. Jeremiah 21:1–23:8.

The prophet Jeremiah has a lot to say about justice... especially as it relates to **government**. Our study today will focus especially on his word to the government leaders of his day (the kings) in chapters 21:1–23:8. When we think **justly** about justice and rightly about righteousness, then, as Lewis reminds us, we have a clue to the meaning of the universe!

II. A Word to the Kings.

- A. Jeremiah 21:1–23:8 is addressed to a series of kings who reigned in Judah on David’s throne. Each of these kings failed **to be** and **to do** what God expected.

To Zedekiah	To Shallum	To Jehoiakim	To Coniah	God will raise up a King who will get it right!
Failure	Failure	Failure	Failure	
21:1–22:10	22:11–17	22:18–23	22:24–30	23:1–8

- B. In the midst of this long passage, we find a sort of **job description** that all the kings of Judah should have been following (ch. 21:11–22:10):

- *“Hear the word of the Lord, O house of David! Thus says the Lord: **Execute justice** in the morning and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed... (ch. 21:11–12).*
- *Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, who sits on the throne of David... Thus says the Lord: Do **justice** and **righteousness**, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place (ch. 22:2–3).*

Basically the king has one primary assignment: do right, execute justice, be fair, distinguish between right and wrong. There is no mention that government should provide health care, education, financial bailouts or social security. The government has one primary duty: **justice for all**. The key words to describe this are:

- Justice—Refers primarily to **behavior**. What a person *does*. Do right.
- Righteousness—Refers primarily to **character**. Who a person *is*. Be right.

- C. A brief look at these government failures.

1. Zedekiah (ch. 21:1–10). Though mentioned first, he was actually the last king of Judah. He reigned 11 years. When he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar he was taken prisoner to Babylon where he died.
2. Shallum (ch. 22:11–17). Also called Jehoahaz he reigned for three months and then was deposed by Pharaoh Neco who sent him to exile in Egypt where he died.
3. Jehoiakim (ch. 22:18–23). He would not listen to God during prosperity or during adversity. After a reign of 11 years he was buried like a donkey.
4. Coniah (ch. 22:24–30). He reigned three months. God compares him to a signet ring (wedding ring?) that has been thrown away! He died in Babylonian captivity.

- D. Jeremiah’s words help us to understand what justice in real life would look like. We might expand the job description for the government leader to include these additional four responsibilities:

1. Defend the **defenseless**. God is especially concerned for the resident alien, the fatherless and the widow (ch. 21:12; 22:3).
2. Do **no violence** to the innocent (ch. 22:3). Use power (military, economic, judicial) to protect and defend those whose rights are being threatened.

3. Don't **abuse power**. Don't use your position for selfish gain. Jehoiakim took advantage of his position to build his own luxurious house (ch. 22:13–17).
4. Be a **model** of godliness for others. The king is not to be greedy, immoral, violent or idolatrous (see for example, Deut. 17:14–20).

Summary: When we use God's job description to measure the kings of Judah, they **all** fall short of the standard. How much more the leaders in government today! Why? Because to establish justice one must first **be just** himself. Does this then mean we should never expect justice through government leaders? To a degree, perhaps, that will always be true! But God shows us a better way....

- E. God will raise up a King who will get it right! (ch. 23:1–8).

The **Good News** is that God understands that, without his transforming grace at work in the human heart, all government leaders will be unjust to one degree or another. This prompts him to step onto the scene himself and do two things:

1. Pronounce **judgment** on the unjust kings ("shepherds") of the earth (ch. 23:1–4). "Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds" (ch. 23:2).
2. Raise up for David "a righteous **Branch**" who will reign as king. He will "execute justice and righteousness in the land". And this is his name: "the Lord our righteousness" (ch. 23:5–6).

III. Justice for All.

- A. *King Jesus*. For centuries Israel **waited** for this promised son of David. Some thought he might be Zerubbabel, others Judas Maccabeus. Finally, when Jesus was born the prophecy came true! His coming means that the Kingdom is here, now! His reign has already begun. Though the kingdom is present, it is not yet *fully* present. It is both **already** and **not yet**. His reign is characterized by:

1. To speak **the truth** (John 18:37).
2. **Division**. In this life he divides humanity by the way they respond to his coming (Matt. 10:34–37) and in the life to come he will separate forever the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25: 31–46).
3. Ultimately, all his enemies will be **destroyed** (Rev. 19:11–21).
4. **Big government!** You think the Democrats believe in big government? You haven't seen anything yet! (Isa. 9:6–7).
5. The key to being part of his kingdom is found in the phrase: "**Jesus is Lord**" (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:9–11).
6. His name (The Lord our righteousness) tells us both *who he is* and *what he does*:
 - He is **righteous**. He is just and fair.
 - He is able to **make us righteous** (the Lord *our* righteousness)... so that we can reign with him! Don't you know? The children of God will one day judge the world... and angels (I Cor. 6:1–5).

- B. *That'll preach!* The New Testament helps us to understand that righteousness comes to us through Someone else! It is not **my** righteousness that matters, but **his** righteousness in me.

... so that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ,

the righteousness from God that depends on faith...(Phil. 3:9; Rom. 10:3–4; II Cor. 5:21).

The great preachers of history (Wesley, Whitefield, Spurgeon, etc.) have seized on the importance of this prophecy and preached on “The Lord Our Righteousness.” At the risk of oversimplification the message is this:

1. We all have an innate sense of **justice** and we have all **failed** to live up to our own standards! We discover the sobering truth of this reality both in ourselves and in our leaders.
 2. King **Jesus** is the only leader worthy of our love and worship.
 3. Jesus is not only righteous himself, he is able to **make us righteous** too (righteous in our character, just in our behavior).
 4. This righteousness comes to us by **grace** through **faith**... not by works lest anyone should boast.
- C. *That’ll sing!* In 1739, Nicholas Von Zinzendorf wrote a hymn that was later translated from German into English by John Wesley. It proclaims the amazing news that the righteousness of Christ can become our own... by grace through faith.

*Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.*

*Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.*

*This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years;
No age can change its glorious hue,
The robe of Christ is ever new.*

*O let the dead now hear Thy voice;
Now bid Thy banished ones rejoice;
Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness.*

TABLE TALK

1. Describe a time when you experienced disappointment when a government leader failed to live up to your expectations? What lessons did you learn?
2. There is much debate today concerning how “big” government should be. Apparently God wants government to be “big enough” to insure that justice is equally applied to all. Describe what this might ideally look like today.
3. One of Jesus’s roles is that of king. Imagine him as president of the United States. What would Jesus do? WWJD?
4. Jesus is righteous but just as importantly, he can *make us* righteous. Is this righteousness “just” a covering for our unrighteousness or is it a work of inner transformation of character?
5. Separation of church and state does not mean separation of God and state. How should Christians today be involved in politics?



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 7. THINGS FALL APART (JEREMIAH 25:1–29)

I. A tough time to live in.

Jeremiah lived in a difficult century. For the Jews, it must have felt like the wheels were coming off. **Externally**, new nations were rising and old nations were falling. **Internally**, there was a downward spiral of unjust governments, compromising priests, and widespread moral decline. Though Judah experienced a short season of revival and reform under King Josiah (648–609 BC), many sensed that something catastrophic was near.

In 1919 an Irish poet named William Butler Yeats also sensed that the century that stretched before him would be filled with death, destruction and calamity. He wrote a poem that captured his despair entitled “The Second Coming.”

*...Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand...*

In this study we will seek to understand **what** was about to happen to Judah and Jerusalem and **why** such disaster was coming.

II. Jeremiah 25:1–29 tells us WHAT is about to happen.

A. Understanding the calendar (Read ch. 25:1–7).

The fourth year of Jehoiakim (v. 1) would have been **605 BC**. That was the year things fell apart in the Ancient Near East. The Assyrian and Egyptian armies were defeated by the Babylonians at the Battle of Carchemish and suddenly, everything changed (see ch. 46). Judah shouldn’t have been surprised by the catastrophic events occurring. Jeremiah had been warning that this very thing was going to happen and he had been preaching this message for **23 years** (vv. 3–5)!

B. The wages of sin (Read ch. 25:8–29).

Because of Judah’s **persistent** and **willful** lifestyle of sin and especially because she refused to repent, judgment was about to fall. Strangely enough, this judgment will be meted out by the Babylonians and will fall not only on Judah, but on many other nations as well (see ch. 1:5) who will be forced to drink “the wine of wrath” from “**the cup**” the Lord is extending to them. Judah, Egypt, Edom, Moab, etc. will all be punished for their sins and then, last of all, Babylon will also be forced to drink from the cup of God’s wrath (vv. 15–27; cf. chapters 46–51). God is issuing a roll call of the nations; one by one they are summoned to judgment. It almost sounds liturgical: “Take this cup, drink... drink all of it” (ch. 25:15, 27).

NOTE: The judgment will fall first on “the city that is called by my name” (ch. 25:29). Judgment always **begins** at the household of God (Ezek. 9:6; I Pet. 4:17) and always **ends** with Babylon (cf. Rev. 18).

- C. The Lord will roar (Read ch. 25:30–38).

For many in Judah, it seemed that God had been **silent**, passive and inactive. His absence gave them “permission” to ignore him and live as if he didn’t exist. But don’t be fooled. The Lion is about to **roar** (vv. 30–31, 33, 38)!

III. But WHY did such terrible judgment fall on the nations, especially on Judah?

First we will look at the generic sins that characterized not only Judah but the surrounding nations as well. These sins always bring judgment (Gal. 6:7). Then we will look at two sins specifically associated with the people of God.

- A. Some of the primary sins that bring God’s wrath on anyone anywhere.

1. **Willful deafness** (see ch. 25:3–4, 7–9; etc.).

*Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but **hear not** (ch. 5:21).*

*Behold, their ears are **uncircumcised**, they cannot listen (ch. 6:10).*

Imagine what it will be like at the judgment for people who had Jeremiah for their pastor for 23 years! The problem was not that the people **could not** hear but that they **would not** hear! In Hebrew, “to hear” is a synonym for “to obey.” “Hear, O Israel...” Only those who hear obey. Only those who obey hear. Perhaps the greatest danger in the evangelical church today is that we have grown so accustomed to hearing the Word we have forgotten how to listen.

2. **Idolatry** (see ch. 25:6; cf. ch. 10, etc.).

Don’t think of idolatry as just bowing down to a statue. “Whatever takes our heart from God, or shares it with him, is an idol.” (John Wesley, Sermon #78). Whatever **captures our hearts** other than God, *that* is an idol (children, relationship, career, money, success, education, sports, ministry, etc.).

3. **Sexuality immorality** (see ch. 2:20,24; 3:6; 9:3; 13:27; 23:10; etc.).

I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighing, your lewd whorings, on the hills in the field. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! (ch. 13:27).

Which comes first: idolatry or immorality? Which is the cause and which is the effect? It’s hard to say. They always **go together**. History is full of examples of civilizations that have imploded because of rampant sexual immorality. One of the marks of judgment is that the “voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” will be heard no more (ch. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Rev. 18:22–23).

4. **Child sacrifice** (see ch. 7:30–31; 32:35; cf. II Chron. 33:6; II Kings 24:1–4).

What the people did in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom (*Ge-henna*) in burning their children in the fire to Molech is difficult for us to imagine. But don’t be naïve and imagine that **abortion** is the only cultural parallel today. Many today continue to sacrifice their children to gods we deem more culturally acceptable: academics, sports, beauty, popularity, success, etc.

- B. Two sins specifically associated with the people of God.

1. Breaking **the Sabbath** (Read ch. 17:19–27).

The Sabbath was a **sign** of the covenant (Ex. 31:13, 17). It served the same purpose as a wedding ring. The reason the people of Judah were in exile for 70 years was so the land could enjoy the Sabbath rests that had been denied it

during the previous centuries (II Chron. 36:17–21). Sabbath was more **privilege** than duty (Mark 2:27). To take one day out of seven for rest and worship marked out Israel as different from all the other nations. Keeping Sabbath helps God’s people to practice the **sanctification of time**. It is not just a day, it is an attitude that recognizes who is the one who really controls our schedules.

2. And especially, spiritual **adultery** (Read ch. 2:1–4:4). (See Chapter 2.)

There was one sin that lay at the root of all Judah’s dysfunction and wickedness. It is the sin Jeremiah addresses at the beginning of his ministry and the **first sermon** preached in his book: spiritual adultery. No sin is uglier, stupider, more heart numbing, or more destructive. And yet when confronted with her sin, Judah:

- Shows no **fear** (ch. 2:19).
- Denies her **guilt** (ch. 2:22–23, 35).
- Has no **shame** (ch. 3:3; 6:15).

When this sin is present judgment is **certain!**

*I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a **bride**, how you followed me in the wilderness... Israel was holy to the Lord... (ch. 2:2–3).*

How can you say, “I am not unclean, I have not gone after the Baals?”... know what you have done – a restless young camel running here and there, a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust? (ch. 2:23–24).

...You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the Lord. (ch. 3:1).

*Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she... played the whore?... I sent her away with a decree of **divorce**. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore... committing adultery with stone and tree... (ch. 3:6–9).*

Adultery is a very serious sin. It is **treason**, betrayal, treachery. It is grounds for divorce. God’s people have often been guilty of this brazen affront to the covenant love of God. Is there a remedy? Can God heal our “**perpetual backsliding**” (ch. 8:5)?

- C. The cure for a wayward heart.

The **bad news** is we are all sinners and our sinful condition will bring wrath and destruction upon us. Whether we are Jews or Babylonians, Christians or Muslims, our sins will bring destruction upon us and on our nation.

The **good news** is there is a way to avert this coming wrath. Though it is mentioned throughout the book of Jeremiah, perhaps its most succinct statement is found in ch. 3:22. *Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your **faithlessness***. The cure involves two parts.

1. Our part is to **return**. This means repentance, removing the detestable things from our lives (ch. 4:1). Our heavenly bridegroom has zero tolerance for other lovers!

2. God’s part is to **heal** our wayward hearts. This is what the New Covenant is all about! ... *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts...* (ch. 31:31–34).

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it; seal it for Thy courts above.
(R. Robinson).*

TABLE TALK

1. When you think about our contemporary world, do you identify with Yeat’s assessment (Things fall apart)? Explain.
2. What does the judgment of God look like? Is it something only in the future or are there contemporary examples?
3. What conclusion should we draw from the fact that sometimes those who claim to be God’s people are often as guilty of sin as those who don’t make such a claim?
4. Do you practice Sabbath? Describe your attitudes about this subject.
5. How do you account for what happened to the ten (lost) tribes of Israel? Did God really “divorce” them? How does this fit into your theology?
6. Can God really cure a heart from backsliding?

THE STEADFAST LOVE OF THE LORD

by Robert Davidson

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases
His mercies never come to an end,
They are new every morning
New every morning
Great is Your faithfulness, O Lord
Great is Your faithfulness (Repeat 2)*



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 8. THE CAUSE AND CURE OF HOMESICKNESS (JEREMIAH 29)

I. The Human Condition.

A. The root problem.

Genesis 3 teaches clearly that the fundamental human problem is **sin**. While other systems of thought have suggested that the root problem of our race lies elsewhere (poverty, ignorance, sickness, the unconscious, boredom, bad karma, suffering, bad relationships, etc.), the Bible sees the root source of all our problems as a refusal to obey our Creator, pride, and egocentrism (sin).

B. The primary symptoms.

But sin has **consequences**. Though the Gospel aims to cure the root disease (sin) it also recognizes the mortal dangers inherent in the symptoms! Fever (a symptom) may kill a patient before the infection does (the cause). Thus we learn that these consequences must be faced and conquered. French existentialism speaks of *ennui* (discontent, boredom) and German philosophy speaks of *angst* (apprehension, dread) but these categories are much too vague and imprecise. Genesis 3–4 gives us a clear picture of the real consequences sin has brought into our world.

1. **Guilt** (Gen. 3:7).
2. **Shame** (Gen. 3:7; cf. 2:25).
3. **Fear** (Gen. 3:8–10).
4. **Alienation** (Gen. 3:12–24). From ourselves, from one another, from nature, from God.
5. **Homesickness**. (Gen. 3:22–24; 4:16; Eccl. 3:11). The remainder of this study will focus on this pervasive symptom of sin that inhabits the heart of everyone everywhere.

C. Much of the world's great literature centers around this theme of homesickness as the most important thing we need to understand about the human condition.

1. *The Odyssey* (Homer). Ulysses is trying to find his way home (Ithaca). One stop on his journey takes him to the island of the lotus-eaters. If you eat the lotus plant you will be “cured” of homesickness by **forgetting** your true home. Ulysses sees the danger and flees the island.
2. *E. T. (The Extra-Terrestrial)*. In the movie, both Elliot and E.T. are homesick, one for his absent father and the other for his extra-terrestrial home. Literally **dying** of homesickness, E.T. speaks, “E.T... phone... home...”
3. *The Stranger (L'Etranger)* (Albert Camus). This melancholic book shows the **meaninglessness** of human existence and how alone and alienated we all are.
4. *Robinson Crusoe* (Daniel Defoe). Marooned on an island, Crusoe tries to find meaning in a world where he knows he is far from home.
5. *The Lord of the Rings* (J. R. R. Tolkien). Through their long journey, Frodo and Sam ache with longing to return home to the Shire. But when they finally

return, Frodo realizes home is not what he imagined and he gets on a ship and sails into the sunset for his **true home**.

“But,” said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, “I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.” “So I thought too, once,” said Frodo. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.” (The Return of the King, p. 1006).

II. A letter from home (Jeremiah 29).

A. The context.

Jeremiah wrote this letter from **Jerusalem** in about 590 BC. Seven years earlier (597 BC) the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and took 3,000 Jews into captivity. Three years after the letter was written (587 BC) the Babylonian army would return to Jerusalem and destroy everything (the walls, the Temple, etc.). This letter then was written between the two invasions (see II Kings 24–25). Verses 1–3 gives us the basic introductory information:

1. The letter is **from** Jeremiah the prophet, living in Jerusalem (the city of God, the city of peace—Jeru-shalom). In reality, the letter is from God.
2. The letter is **to** the 3,000 Jews living in forced exile in Babylon (the city of man, the epitome of evil and godlessness; cf. Rev. 18). They are homesick!
3. The **messenger** is Elasah (an emissary between Zedekiah, king of Judah and Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.)
4. The **reason** for the letter is that Jeremiah (in Jerusalem) had learned that certain Jewish prophets in Babylon were predicting a short stay in exile and a speedy return to Jerusalem (see Jer. 28:2–4). Jeremiah writes to warn the exiles not to trust in false prophets using deceptive words.

B. The letter itself (vv. 4–32).

1. Things God wants exiles in Babylon to **remember** (read v. 4).

In Babylon, you may be tempted to think it was Nebuchadnezzar who brought you here because of his imperialistic agenda. Not so! It was **the Lord** himself who brought you here because of your sin. Babylon is the place where you will repent of your sin and be cleansed so that the image of God can be restored in you. God has a **purpose** for your exile and he will not allow you to come home until that purpose is accomplished!

2. Things God wants exiles in Babylon to **do** (read vv. 5–9).
 - a. Don't expect a **quick** deliverance (vv. 5–6). Settle down for a long stay. Build houses. Plant gardens. Start families and have children and grandchildren. This is going to take longer than you think!
 - b. Seek the **shalom** of Babylon and pray for her (v. 7). Your well-being is tied to Babylon's well-being. You don't have to live in Jeru-shalom to have shalom.

- c. Choose your **prophets** carefully (vv. 8–9). In Babylon many will preach a “prosperity gospel” that pleases the masses. But avoid false prophets at all costs. Specifically, be careful concerning:
- *Ahab* and *Zedekiah* (read vv. 21–23). They are prophesying **lies** in God’s name as well as committing adultery with their neighbor’s wives. They will soon be punished!
 - *Shemaiah* (read vv. 24–32). His message was that the exile would be short and the return to Jerusalem imminent. All will be well! But God considers such preaching as equivalent to **rebellion**. He too will soon be punished.
 - *Hananiah* (ch. 28). This popular preacher told the people what they so wanted to hear: “Within **two years**” God will bring you back to Jerusalem and the yoke of the king of Babylon will be broken (ch. 28:2–4). And all the people must have said, “Amen!”
3. Things God wants exiles in Babylon to **believe** (read vv. 10–14).
- In Babylon it is easy to draw the conclusion that God has **forgotten** us and that his **promises** aren’t true. Jeremiah reminds the people that just the opposite is true! In Babylon especially we have the opportunity to prove God’s word is true.
- I will visit you and deliver you... but I’ll do this in **70 years**.
 - I will bring you back to Jerusalem.
 - I have **good plans** for you, not evil plans.
 - I will give you a **future** and a hope.
 - Yes, you will find me... when you seek me with **all your heart**.
 - I will **restore** your fortunes.
4. Things God wants exiles in Babylon to **know** (read vv. 15–19).
- Don’t long for “the good ole’ days” back in Jerusalem when everything was peachy. Have you forgotten so quickly? Your friends and family still in Jerusalem are about to be visited by the sword, famine and pestilence. Your safety, prosperity and joy have nothing to do with your **location** and everything to do with your spiritual condition. Here in Babylon, if you obey God’s will and do what he says, **all will be well** for you! And there in Jerusalem, if you live in rebellion and sin, judgment will fall upon you!

III. Anybody homesick?

- A. The **challenge** of homesickness. Today, when we find ourselves in “Babylon”, we begin to wonder from what malady we suffer. The name of our disease is homesickness. We often respond as the exiles did in Psalm 137:1–6:

¹*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.*

²*On the willows there we hung up our lyres.*

³*For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”* ⁴*How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*

⁵*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!*

⁶*Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*

The great challenge of the Christian journey is learning to sing the Lord's song... in a strange land (Babylon). We must find the grace to live as expatriates... or perhaps as people with **dual citizenship**. Our grandparents were really good at this!

*O Lord you know I have no friend like you
If heaven's not my home then Lord what will I do?
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.
(Albert Brumley & Mary Reeves).*

- B. The **cause** of homesickness is precisely the reality that we aren't home yet! Thus, homesickness is a very **good disease** to have.
- C. The **cure** for homesickness is this:
- **Remember** that God is the one in control of your circumstances, not Satan!
 - Stop **complaining** and accept where God has placed you.
 - God's purposes for your life will probably take **longer** than you think.
 - Be very careful about the **preachers** you listen to.
 - **Bloom** where you are planted. Work and pray for the shalom of Babylon.
 - **Believe** the promises of God... even when it makes no sense.
 - **Seek** the Lord, with all your heart.

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. (Mere Christianity. C. S. Lewis).

TABLE TALK

1. Describe a time in your life when you were homesick. When you finally did get home was it what you expected? Where is home? When is home? Who is home?
2. Has this lesson changed the way you think about reaching the lost?
3. Have you learned to "sing the Lord's song" in a "foreign land" or have you stopped singing and hung up your harp?
4. Why did our grandparents love to sing about heaven? Why does this generation sing about it so seldom?
5. Describe someone you know who has chosen to eat "the lotus plant" so that they deal with the pain of homesickness by forgetting they have a home. Is there a better way?
6. Christians have dual citizenship. We live in the city of man (Babylon) but our true citizenship is in the city of God (Jerusalem). Explain what this means. Make it personal.



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 9. THE BOOK OF CONSOLATION (JEREMIAH 30–33)

I. Introduction.

A. Remember the key verse (ch. 1:10).

Jeremiah’s mission was “to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (ch. 1:10). Four verbs indicate how to deal with **the problem** and two verbs how to deal with **the solution**. Most of the 52 chapters illustrate the first four verbs. However, at least four chapters (ch. 30–33) focus on the solution. These verses are filled with hope and promise for a bright tomorrow.

*And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring harm, so I will watch over them to **build** and to **plant**, declares the Lord (ch. 31:28).*

B. Beautiful contrast.

Just as a diamond’s beauty is most visible when displayed against black velvet, so the promises of God are brightest when set in the midst of judgment and wrath. Often called “The Book of Consolation,” right in the middle of Jeremiah’s long narrative, we discover four chapters that mark a dramatic **contrast** to the rest of the book.

Chapters 1–29 and 34–52	Chapters 30–33
Disobedience and judgment	Grace and salvation
What man does	What God does (“I will...”)
God will pluck up, break, destroy, overthrow	God will build and plant
Things fall apart	The center can hold!
The present is terrible	The future will be glorious
God is casting away his people	God is gathering his people
The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23)	The gift of God is eternal life
Where sin abounded (Rom. 5:20)	Grace abounded even more

II. Words of Comfort in Times of Crisis (chapters 30–33).

A. And God steps in!

The most obvious characteristic of these four chapters is the way God himself steps into the picture. Elsewhere in the book, one is tempted to ask, “Where is God?” But in these chapters he is in full control. “Behold, the days are coming” (ch. 30:3) when God will step in and take over! Over 60 times we read that God says, “**I will.**”

1. *I will **restore** the fortunes of my people (ch. 30:3,18; 32:44; 33:7,11,26).*
2. *I will bring you back to the land (ch. 30:3; 32:37).*
3. *I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon (ch. 30:8).*
4. *I will burst your bonds (ch. 30:8).*
5. *I will **save** you (ch. 30:10).*
6. *I will make a full end of other nations but not of you (ch. 30:11).*
7. *I will discipline you in just measure (ch. 30:11).*
8. *I will restore health to you and **heal** you (ch. 30:17).*
9. *I will multiply you and honor you (ch. 30:19).*
10. *I will punish those who oppress you (ch. 30:20).*
11. *I will be your God and you will be my people (ch. 30:22; 31:33; 32:38).*
12. *I will **build** you and you shall be built (ch. 31:4).*
13. *I will **gather** you from all the places I scattered you (ch. 31:8–9; 32:37).*
14. *I will make you walk in a straight path and not stumble (ch. 31:9).*
15. *I will turn your mourning to **joy** and your sorrow to gladness (ch. 31:13).*
16. *I will feed your souls so that you are satisfied (ch. 31:14).*
17. *I will satisfy the weary soul and replenish the languishing soul (ch. 31:25).*
18. *I will build you up and plant you (ch. 31:28).*
19. *I will make a new and everlasting **covenant** with you (ch. 31:31; 32:40).*
20. *I will put my law within you and write it on your hearts (ch. 31:33).*
21. *I will **forgive** your iniquity and remember your sin no more (ch. 31:34).*
22. *I will make you dwell in **safety** (ch. 32:37).*
23. *I will give you **one heart** and one way (ch. 32:39).*
24. *I will not turn away from doing good to you (ch. 32:40).*
25. *I will put the fear of me in your hearts (ch. 32:40).*
26. *I will rejoice in doing good to you (ch. 32:41).*
27. *I will plant you in this land in faithfulness with all my heart and soul (ch. 32:41).*
28. *I will bring upon you all the good that I **promised** you (ch. 32:42).*
29. *I will answer you when you call to me (ch. 33:3).*
30. *I will show you great and hidden things you have not known (ch. 33:3).*
31. *I will bring healing to this city and make it **prosperous** and secure (ch. 33:6).*
32. *I will rebuild you as you were at first (ch. 33:7).*
33. *I will **cleanse** you from all the guilt of your sin against me (ch. 33:8).*
34. *I will forgive all your sin and rebellion against me (ch. 33:8).*
35. *I will fulfill the promise I made to you (ch. 33:14).*
36. *I will cause a righteous **Branch** to spring up for David (ch. 33:15–16).*
37. *I will multiply the offspring of David and the Levitical priests (ch. 33:22).*
38. *I will keep my covenant promise to you as long as I keep my covenant promise with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth (ch. 33:25–26; cf. 31:35–37).*

B. Survey of the Book of Consolation (chapters 30–33).

At the risk of oversimplification, let's summarize the contents of these four chapters in three penetrating questions and three life-changing answers:

1. **Chapter 30. What** is God doing? (Read ch. 30:1–3, 12–17).

Far from minimizing Judah's sin, God highlights the **irremediable** condition of his people. And yet, when things are hopeless, there is hope!

*Alas! That day is so great there is none like it;
it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be saved out of it (ch. 30:7).*

God is indeed punishing Judah for her sin and rebellion. But the punishment is not just punitive. It has a **purpose** (ch. 30:11; cf. Hebrews 12:3–11). Yes, Judah’s sin is “incurable” (ch. 30:12, 15). But God will heal her anyway (ch. 30:17). This will only make sense in **retrospect!** *In the latter days you will understand this* (ch. 30:24). What is God doing? He is healing that which is incurable. With man this is impossible. But all things are possible with God! (Mark 10:27).

2. **Chapter 31. Why** is God doing what he is doing?

But what could possibly **motivate** a holy God to lavish such blessings on a people so hard-hearted and undeserving? Chapter 31 gives us three insights into the character of God that help us better understand the reason why.

- a. He **loves us** (Read ch. 31:3, 9, 20, 35–37). Only lavish love can “explain” such irrational behavior! But *why* does God love us? Certainly not because of any merit in us! He loves us because he loves us. The reason is found in the holy heart of our heavenly **Father** (ch. 31:9, 20; John 3:16; Rom. 5:6–8; I John 4:7–12).
- b. He wants **the nations** to come to know him (ch. 31:10). It’s not **about you!** God saved Judah so that God could save the world through Judah. He wants to reveal himself to the nations through the testimony of his covenant people.
- c. He has a plan to do something **entirely new** in the earth. No one could have ever imagined this! Two new things are mentioned in this chapter.
 - 1) A woman **encircles** a man (ch. 31:22). This “new thing” God is about to do is a reversal of the natural order. The word “create” points to a work that only God can do. A woman “surrounding” a man is seen by many (Jerome, Augustine, Matthew Henry, etc.) to be a reference to the way Mary “encircled” Jesus in the womb and protected the Son of God as a child. The “new thing” thus becomes the virgin birth and the **incarnation**. God is going to save his people from Babylon by coming to live with them there!
 - 2) A new **covenant** (ch. 31:31–32). It’s not that the covenant on Mount Sinai was flawed but there was clearly a limit to what it could do. God had built **obsolescence** into the Mosaic covenant (Hebrews 8:13). A better covenant was needed if God’s people were to survive and thrive in Babylon (Hebrews 8:6–13; 9:13–15; 10:9).

3. **Chapters 32–33.** What should I do? How does this **impact my life?**

In the light of God’s amazing love for sinners, his readiness to forgive, his new covenant, and his unfailing promises, how then should we live? We still live in Babylon and our earthly circumstances have not changed. Is this message just for the future, **pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by?** Chapters 32–33 orient us to two things we must learn if we are to live victoriously in an evil generation.

- a. Let the promises for **tomorrow** change the way you live **today!** Even though the Babylonian army is laying siege to Jerusalem, God tells Jeremiah to buy some real estate (ch. 32:1–15). The prophet asks for wisdom to understand why (ch. 32:16–44). *Nothing is too hard for God* (ch. 32:17,27). The only people who make a real difference in **this world** are those who live for the coming world. God’s people actually care about Babylon (ch. 29:7). (Illustration: The Road to Nowhere).

- b. Learn how to **pray**. God invites us: “Call to me and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things you have not known (ch. 33:3). We can survive and even **thrive** in Babylon if we know how to talk with God. This helps us to remember *there is hope for [our] future* (ch. 31:17).

III. The New Covenant (Read ch. 31:31–34; 32:39–40; 33:8).

The two covenants (the old with Moses at Sinai and the new with Jesus at Calvary) are not just a description of chronological history. They also describe the journey that disciples take as they discover the unfolding reality of what it means to be a follower of Christ. They seem to represent **two stages** of the Christian life. Andrew Murray, Charles Finney and others believed that the New Covenant was a picture of the promise of the deeper, victorious life. Moving from the old to the new is not just something that Israel needed to do. We all need to do it as well! There are at least three ways that the New Covenant is **better** than the old.

- A. A new **motivation** (ch. 31:33). The Old Covenant was external, written on tablets of stone. The New Covenant is internal, written by the Spirit on our hearts. We obey God’s law not because we have to but because we **want to**. Uncle Buddy Robinson used to say, “In Christ I am free to sin all I want to. But thank God, I don’t want to!” The New Covenant deals not so much with our actions (behavior modification) as it deals with our **heart** (Matt. 5:17–48).
- B. A new **relationship** (ch. 31:34; cf. 9:23). The Old Covenant enabled people to know **about** God. The New Covenant makes it possible to actually know God personally, face to face. The Gospel is not the offer of a new **religion** but a new relationship. The veil in the temple has been torn in two so that we can now enter boldly into the very presence of God (Matt. 27:51; Heb. 4:16; 6:19; 10:19–22).
- C. A new **power** (ch. 33:8). The New Covenant promises not just an outward forgiveness for sinful actions but an inward **cleansing** from the sinful nature. Not only are the **consequences** of sin erased but the power of sin is broken! As Charles Wesley sang it, “He breaks the power of cancelled sin...” (Illustration: Kill the spider).

TABLE TALK

1. Bad news must be preached before Good News is understood. What did this mean in Jeremiah’s day? Has then been true in your own experience?
2. Is anything too hard for God? Most of us believe he can forgive sinful actions but do we believe he can cleanse the sinful nature?
3. Why does God say that Israel’s sin is “incurable” and then announces that he can heal it?
5. Is there a cure for sin in this life? Is there a balm in Gilead (Jer. 8:22)?
6. Have you ever thought of the New Covenant as a description of the Deeper Life? Do you agree that it is? Why or why not?
7. Distinguish between the forgiveness of sins and the cleansing of sin. Why is this distinction so important?



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 10. BARUCH THE MAGNIFICENT (JEREMIAH 45, ETC.)

I. The Unsung Hero

- A. Let us now praise **not-so-famous** men¹ (and women!).

Someone once asked Leonard Bernstein what was the most difficult instrument in the orchestra to play. He replied: “**Second fiddle**.” This lesson will focus on those persons who humbly serve in roles that are **invisible**, **unnoticed**, and **unvalued**. This is illustrated by a story told by JoAnn C. Jones related in Robert K. Greenleaf’s book *Servant Leadership*.

During my second year of nursing school, our professor gave us a quiz. I breezed through the questions until I read the last one: “What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?” Surely this was a joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Before the class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our grade. “Absolutely,” the professor said. “In your careers, you will meet many people – all are significant. They deserve your attention and care. Even if all you do is smile and say hello.” I have never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Dorothy.²

- B. Side-kicks.

Many famous persons (in history, film, literature) had a sidekick who was almost as famous as they were: Batman and **Robin**, Andy Taylor and **Barney Fife**, Yogi Berra and **BooBoo**... Moses and **Aaron**, Esther and **Mordecai**, David and **Jonathan**, Paul and **Barnabas**, etc. But most “sidekicks” are completely unknown!

Today we will examine the life of the man who played second fiddle to Jeremiah: Baruch Ben Neriah. Though his ministry was almost completely invisible and many don’t remember him at all, we can safely say that there would never have been a Jeremiah had there not been a Baruch. He is the **unsung hero** of the entire book!

II. Glimpses of one of the world’s most famous unknowns.

Four passages in the book give us a glimpse of the **indispensable** role played by Baruch. These cameo appearances help us to better understand what is involved in playing “second fiddle” in God’s orchestra. We will look at the passages in chronological order (not in the order they appear in the book).

- A. Chapter 36:1–32. The 4th year of King Jehoiakim (605 BC).

The world changed in the year 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army defeated the Assyrians and the Egyptians at the Battle of **Carchemish** (ch. 46:2). Because Judah had been in alliance with Egypt, her fate was now sealed. The Babylonians would soon be headed her way!

¹ “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” is the title of a book written in 1941 by James Agee, with photographs by Walker Evans. The title comes from a passage in the ancient Hebrew book, “The Wisdom of Sirach.”

² *Servant Leadership*, by Robert K. Greenleaf. New York: Paulist Press, 1977. pp. 9–10.

There is much in this passage that is of interest, especially relating how the Bible came into existence (inspiration, writing down the text, transmission, perseverance), but our focus is on the role of Baruch. He is Jeremiah's **secretary**, or scribe.

1. Verses 1–8, 17–19. Baruch took **dictation** from Jeremiah³, served as a **substitute** preacher, and did everything Jeremiah told him to do. When he preached by reading from the scroll, the leaders were terrified and wanted to know where he got this message. “We must report all these words to the king”, they concluded. They then told Baruch to take Jeremiah and go and hide.
 2. Verses 21–26. When King Jehoiakim heard what the scroll said, he hardened his heart and **burned** God's Word in defiance! He ordered the arrest of Jeremiah *and* Baruch. What a contrast this was to the way his father, King Josiah, had responded 17 years earlier when a scroll containing God's Word had been read to him (II Kings 22:8–13).
 3. Verses 27–28, 32. God told Jeremiah to dictate another scroll containing the same message. So the prophet and scribe sat down together and patiently went through the process all over again, this time adding additional information. Imagine what it must have meant to Jeremiah to have such a **devoted, competent, loyal, courageous, steadfast, tenacious** secretary!
- B. Chapter 32:1–15. The 10th year of King Zedekiah (587 BC).
During the **siege** of Jerusalem while he was a **prisoner** (vv. 2–3), Jeremiah decided to buy some real estate! The city was about to be destroyed and the inhabitants taken into exile, yet Jeremiah took this step of faith, knowing that his actions were making a public statement for all to see. He was investing in **the promises** of God! But who could he choose to be the executor of the estate? Who else but Baruch!
- C. Chapter 43:1–7. After the destruction of Jerusalem (about 586 BC).
Jerusalem had fallen and was now in ruins. When the puppet ruler in Jerusalem (Gedaliah) was murdered (ch. 41), everyone knew the Babylonians would soon be back to deal with situation. People wanted to flee to Egypt for safety but Jeremiah urged them not to go there but to remain in the land of Judah (ch. 42:9–17). The rebel leaders refused to listen and a large number of Jews headed south for Egypt, **forcing** Jeremiah (about 70 years old) and Baruch to go with them. Baruch was apparently with his friend Jeremiah to **the very end**.
- D. Chapter 45:1–5. Actually this passage comes first in chronological order (605 BC).
This short passage is a “sermon” from Jeremiah to Baruch! We're examining it last because it reveals the true secret of Baruch's greatness more than any other passage.
1. Baruch apparently **struggled** with his calling to play second fiddle.
 - a. For one thing, it must have been difficult to work for a prophet of doom and destruction! His only recorded words are these: “**Woe is me!** For the Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am **weary** with my groaning and I find no rest.” (v. 3).
 - b. For another thing, Baruch apparently aspired to be more than a “secretary” in life. He came from a prominent family: his brother Seraiah was the king's quartermaster/chief of staff (ch. 51:59) and his

³ The message on the scroll was basically the prophetic announcement that the King of Babylon would come and destroy Jerusalem (36:29). God hoped the shocking announcement would cause the inhabitants of Jerusalem to repent (36:3).

grandfather, Mahseiah may have been a governor of Jerusalem (II Chron. 34:8). So Baruch would have had many **career options** to consider. To be secretary to the king might have looked good on his resume. But to be secretary to a fire-breathing, Bible-thumping, pulpit-pounding prophet of repentance was another matter. It takes **great grace** to play second fiddle. “*And do you seek **great things** for yourself?*” (v. 5).

2. God told him to **get over it**... and play his secretary role with all his heart.

God showed little sympathy for Baruch and his struggle with his “difficult” calling. “**Stop** seeking great things for yourself,” and devote yourself to what you are called *and* gifted to do! God then gave him a beautiful promise: “I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go” (v. 5).

III. Lessons for us today.

There are at least five magnificent qualities that we see in the life of Baruch that make him a saint of God that each of us should emulate.

- A. The need for **discernment**.

Jeremiah was not the only preacher in town! Others were present and frankly much more popular (chapters 28–29, etc.). But Baruch had the gift of discernment. He was able to discern truth from error. He **chose** to identify with a preacher and a message that was unpopular and would put an end to all career advancement! *Repent or perish!* He cast his lot with Jeremiah *not* because it was the popular thing to do but because it was the right thing to do. The real challenge in playing second fiddle is not just playing second but choosing the **right orchestra!**

Illustration: Most people think that Frodo is the hero in *The Lord of the Rings*. Think again. **Sam Gangee** may better qualify for the title. Yes, Frodo had been entrusted with the mission to carry the ring to the Cracks of Doom but Sam was there all the way to help, encourage, support, and protect. Nearing the end of the journey, Frodo wearies and wants to quit. He asks Sam to carry the ring the rest of the way without him. But Sam knows that he is not the ring-bearer and can never be. “I can’t carry the ring,” he says, “but I can **carry you!**” (paraphrase, Vol. III, p. 919). Sam then lifts Frodo on his shoulders and carries him the rest of the way.

- B. Contentment in being **invisible**.

Baruch worked in the shadows. His work was hidden and largely unnoticed. Most people don’t even know his name. And yet, without him two books of the Bible would be missing (Jeremiah and Lamentations). Just because a person and a ministry are unnoticed does not mean they are **unimportant!** (Your heart is invisible, too!).

- C. Joy in **servanthood**.

Baruch found meaning in serving someone else. It takes a secure **self-image** to serve (see John 13:3–4)! Only someone who has “the mind of Christ” can obey the command in Philippians 2:3 to “do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others **more significant** than yourselves.”

*You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to **give his life** as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42–45).*

D. The beauty of **humility**.

Though Baruch had a good education and multiple opportunities to rise to the top, he found joy and purpose in promoting someone else. Humility is not **thinking badly** of yourself, it is not thinking of yourself at all (C. S. Lewis). Baruch found greatness by *not* looking for it (ch. 45:5)!

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Romans 12:3).

E. **Agape love** and the power of self-forgetfulness.

No one can serve like Baruch until he has the agape-love of God poured into his heart (Romans 5:5). Baruch found his greatest joy not when *he* succeeded in his mission, but when Jeremiah succeeded in his!

TABLE TALK

1. Discuss what it means to play “second fiddle.” Make it personal.
2. Do you identify more with Jeremiah and his role or with Baruch and his? Discuss the relationship between the one being served and the one who serves.
3. Think of someone you know who is invisible and unnoticed and yet plays an indispensable role. What can you do to encourage them and express appreciation?
4. Are you seeking “great things” for yourself?
5. When you find yourself playing second fiddle do you complain “Woe is me!”?
6. Look again at the five character traits of Baruch: discernment, invisibility, servanthood, humility, agape/love. Which trait is weakest in your life? What will you do about it?
7. Name one specific thing that God has said to you today. Share it with the group.



FIRE IN THE BELLY

A Bible Study on Jeremiah by Stan Key

CHAPTER 11. SINGING THE BLUES (THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS)

I. Explaining the Unexplainable and Accepting the Unacceptable.

A. Things fall apart (look at Jeremiah 52).

Most of us can remember where we were and what we were doing on **September 11, 2001**. The images and emotions are seared into our memory. This would have been immeasurably more true for the Jews living in 586 BC. The book of Jeremiah closes with a graphic description of siege, famine, terror, plunder, killings, cruelty and public executions. But far more traumatic was the unfathomable reality that:

- **Jerusalem** was destroyed.
- The throne of **David** was empty.
- The **temple** of God was in ruins and the Ark of the Covenant gone.
- The people of God were deported into exile in **Babylon**.

The greatest sufferings in life are not material losses or physical pain but the emotional and spiritual trauma of abandonment and **despair**. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Psalm 22:1).

B. When things fall apart everyone becomes a philosopher

Throughout history, different religions and philosophies have tried to deal with the problem of pain. Some of the “answers” include:

1. *Hinduism*. Evil and suffering are **an illusion**.
2. *Buddhism*. We suffer because we have unmet desires. Therefore, **snuff out** these desires and you will no longer suffer (Nirvana is the state of the snuffed out candle).
3. *Islam*. Suffering is the will of Allah. **Submit** to his will.
4. *Atheistic Darwinism*. This is just how it works **in the jungle**. The strong survive and the weak don't. So deal with it!
5. *Christianity*. The problem of suffering is especially problematic for Christians because of two fundamental beliefs: 1) God is **good**, and 2) God is **all powerful**. Therefore, the reality of suffering puts us on the horns of a dilemma:
 - God could do something but he **won't** (he is powerful but not good).
 - God would do something but he **can't** (he is good but not powerful).

This study will not try to solve the problem of evil but will rather focus on one helpful way God's people have found to respond to evil, suffering and pain: **singing the blues**.

II. Lamentations

A. Jeremiah's response to pain and suffering.

Jeremiah responded to suffering by writing Lamentations. The dictionary defines the verb “lament” as to **grieve**, to **mourn**, to **wail**. His book is a poem or song

expressing deep grief. It was probably intended to be sung! Not all worship music is happy, joyful, or contemplative. Sometimes God's people need to sing the blues.

B. A skillful poet.

The book is composed of five poems/songs corresponding to the five chapters. Each poem is an **acrostic**, meaning that each stanza of each poem begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. Because the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, each chapter has 22 verses, except the third chapter which has 66 verses (an acrostic with a triple application). There is some variation in the pattern:

- Chapters 1 and 2 have stanzas of three lines each.
- Chapter 4 has stanzas of two lines each.
- Chapter 5 has stanzas of one line each.
- Chapter 3 is different in that each stanza is formed of three verses.

C. Survey of the book of Lamentations.

The best way to learn how to sing the blues is to walk through this little book, chapter by chapter and listen to what Jeremiah wants to teach us to sing.

1. Chapter 1.

*How **lonely** sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. (ch. 1:1)*

*The enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things; for she has seen the nations enter her **sanctuary**, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. (ch. 1:10).*

*“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which **the Lord** inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.” (ch. 1:12).*

2. Chapter 2.

*The Lord has become like an **enemy**; he has swallowed up Israel; he has swallowed up all its palaces; he has laid in ruins its strongholds, and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation (ch. 2:5).*

*All who pass along the way clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem: “Is this the city that was called the **perfection of beauty**, the joy of all the earth?” (ch. 2:15).*

Look, O Lord, and see! With whom have you dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord? (ch. 2:20).

3. Chapter 3. Jeremiah moves from grief in general to his grief in particular!

*He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy; though I call and cry for help, he **shuts out** my prayer; he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones; he has made my paths crooked. He is a **bear** lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding; he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate; he bent his bow and set me as a **target** for his arrow. He drove into my kidneys the*

*arrows of his quiver; I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long. He has filled me with **bitterness**; he has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my **hope** from the Lord” (ch. 3:7–18).*

4. Chapter 4.

*The tongue of the nursing infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children **beg for food**, but no one gives to them. Those who once feasted on delicacies perish in the streets; those who were brought up in purple embrace ash heaps (ch. 4:4–5).*

*The hands of **compassionate** women have boiled their own children; they became their food during the destruction of the daughter of my people (ch. 4:10).*

5. Chapter 5.

*Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace! Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to **foreigners**. We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows (ch. 5:1–3).*

*Our skin is hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine. Women are **raped** in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands; no respect is shown to the elders (ch. 5:10–11).*

***Why** do you forget us forever, **why** do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us (ch. 5:20–22).*

III. Singing the blues.

There is no better **grief management** tool than this! This is the best therapeutic treatment for grief ever devised. What about you? Any losses in your life? Any pains? Any “Why?” questions? When things fall apart, then sing the blues... God’s way.

- A. Be **real**. Don’t **deny** your pain and don’t **pretend** it doesn’t hurt. Don’t put on a happy face and force yourself to say “Praise the Lord.” Lamentations is not written to explain your sorrow nor cure your grief. It is written to help you **express it!** Contrast Buddha sitting cross-legged under the lotus tree with his eyes shut to Jesus on the cross with his eyes wide open embracing the pain of the world.
- B. Be **thorough**. Lamentations is an acrostic. Go through the **alphabet of grief** (A is for the lost Ark... B is for the Books burned... C is for the hungry Children...). Then go through the alphabet again... and again. Grieve **everything!** Don’t leave anything out. Don’t look for short cuts. The way out of grief is *through* it. But after you have gone through the alphabet of grief enough times (five, perhaps?) then when you reach Z you will be honestly ready to say, “I’m done. I think I’m ready to **move on.**”
- C. Be **connected**. You must not sing the blues alone. Lamentations is not meant to be **a solo**. Few things are more destructive and dangerous than when someone grieves in isolation, cut off from contact with others. The **Wailing Wall** in Jerusalem is so powerful because it is a place where people can grieve together.

- D. Be **theological**. Lamentations is theological, not **psychological**. It is about God. It takes more than “grief management” and guidance through the “stages of grief” to find real healing. Express your pain not just to a counselor but **to God**. He can handle it. Jeremiah holds God responsible for all that has happened to him! But Jeremiah also knows that only God can bind up our broken hearts. Psychology pretends that **time** heals all wounds. That’s a lie! Only God can heal.
- E. Be **hopeful**. Most of Lamentations is weeping and moaning. But right in the middle of the book, like a diamond against a background of black velvet, is one of the greatest confessions of hope in all the Bible.

*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The **steadfast love** of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will **hope** in him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should **wait quietly** for the salvation of the Lord (ch. 3:21–26).*

This is how the Bible spells H-O-P-E. We may never find a sufficient explanation for why things happened as they did and our circumstances may not change, but:

1. God is **good**... all the time.
2. God is **faithful**... all the time.
3. God is **merciful**... all the time.
4. God’s **steadfast love** never ceases... all the time.

TABLE TALK

1. What did God say to you in the lesson today?
2. Does the Bible answer the question of why bad things happen?
3. How do most American evangelicals handle grief and suffering? Why?
4. Does your Christian community make room for people to grieve? Does your church allow for people to “sing the blues” and lament?
5. How does the cross impact your “theology of suffering”?
6. Of the five ways the study encourages you to sing the blues (be real, be thorough, be connected, be theological, and be hopeful), which one is most difficult for you?

NOTES



The Key to Joy

by Stan Key

*Broken heart and shattered world,
The center cannot hold;
My faith is feeble, hope is spent,
My love has grown so cold.
It seems, O Lord, that all is lost,
I don't know what to do;
In dark despair, my only cry:
"All I have is You."*

*And then – a slender ray of hope
Illuminates my tomb;
A tiny spark, the faintest prayer,
Is kindled in the gloom.
I grope for words to help express
What I now see is true;
Into the void I whisper them:
"All I need is You."*

*The world around me hasn't changed,
The status quo's in place.
But in my heart there's been a shift
For I have seen His face.
And though the old is present yet
I know there's something new;
For now I've found the key to joy:
"All I want is You!"*

