

Jeremiah

Rebuke and Retribution

Lesson #4 for October 24, 2015

Scriptures: Jeremiah 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 14:1-16; 17:1-4,5-10; John 3:19.

1. This lesson will take us into a series of rebukes, and even laments, on the part of Jeremiah with retributions from the leaders concerning the problems that faced Judah in the final years of its independence. (605-586 B.C.)
2. The work of God's prophets down through the times of the Old Testament almost always seemed to be a futile one. Despite warning after warning, the people kept turning away from God. The story of Jeremiah was certainly no exception. Read Ecclesiastes 1:9. Is it true that there is nothing new under the sun? When Jesus came to this earth, He was still pronouncing woes on the scribes and Pharisees! (Matthew 23:29-30)
3. The people in the days of Jeremiah were trying to be fence-sitters. Many of them were claiming to worship the true God on Sabbath but were going to the many, many fertility cult shrines during the rest of the week. Jesus said that one cannot serve two masters. (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13) On one occasion, He put it even more starkly: "Anyone who is not for me is really against me; anyone who does not help me gather is really scattering." (Luke 11:23, *GNB*) Was Jesus saying that it is impossible to be a fence-sitter?
4. Would that be a way of stating the issues in the great controversy at the most basic level? Is it really true that if we are not actively serving the Lord Jesus Christ, we are on the Devil's side? Read Jeremiah 17:5-10. The kings of Judah kept flopping back and forth, putting their trust in the strength of other nations and foolishly ignoring the warnings of Jeremiah.
5. God bluntly said to them: "I will condemn those who turn away from me and put their trust in human beings, in the strength of mortals." (Jeremiah 17:5, *GNB*) He likened those who remain faithful to God to a tree planted near a stream. But, He went on to say: "Who can understand the human heart? There is nothing else so deceitful; it is too sick to be healed. I, the LORD, search the minds and test the hearts of people. I treat each of them according to the way they live, according to what they do." (Jeremiah 17:9-10, *GNB*) So, how do we make sure that we are fully and completely on God's side and not on the Devil's side? Humans seem to be inherently sinful. Obviously, we are all sinners. Only God can change that. Our only safety is to be continually watered by the living waters prepared for us by the Holy Spirit in giving us the inspired records through the prophets.
6. A careful review of God's plan for our lives makes it plain that there are three things God asks us to do to build our relationship with Him: 1) Bible study, 2) Prayer, and 3) Witnessing for the Lord. These are the ways we get to know God and represent Him correctly to those around us. Are we doing those things?
7. How would you feel if God appointed you to point out the sins of all those around you? Maybe some people enjoy condemning others; but, for most of us, it would be a very unappealing work. While some might actually repent and reform in response to strong and pointed rebukes, most would probably find it only irritating and turn their backs.

8. Read Jeremiah 17:1-4. God was pointing out that the sins of the people of Judah were indelibly written on their hearts. They continued to worship at the fertility shrines described as being under every green tree and on the hilltops and the mountains. (Jeremiah 2:20; 3:6,13; 17:2) God warned them that if they continued to do that, the land would be taken away by their enemies, and His “anger” would burn like a fire forever. (Jeremiah 17:4)
9. Read Deuteronomy 30:10; Psalm 40:8; and Jeremiah 31:31-34. What does it mean to *have the law written on your heart* or to *obey God with all your heart*? Does that mean that we need to focus exclusively on Him and His plans for our lives and not keep going back and forth between pretending to serve Him and worshiping at the shrines of the world?

What a lesson is this to men holding positions of responsibility today in the church of God! What a solemn warning to deal faithfully with wrongs that bring dishonor to the cause of truth! Let none who claim to be the depositaries of God’s law flatter themselves that the regard they may outwardly show toward the commandments will preserve them from the exercise of divine justice. Let none refuse to be reprov’d for evil, nor charge the servants of God with being too zealous in endeavoring to cleanse the camp from evil-doing. A sin-hating God calls upon those who claim to keep His law to depart from all iniquity. A neglect to repent and to render willing obedience will bring upon men and women today as serious consequences as came [417] upon ancient Israel. There is a limit beyond which the judgments of Jehovah can no longer be delayed. The desolation of Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah is a solemn warning to modern Israel, that the counsels and admonitions given them through chosen instrumentalities cannot be disregarded with impunity.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 416.2-417.0.

10. Are we as the Seventh-day Adventist Church taking God’s warnings seriously? Are we giving the three angels’ messages to a doomed world? Or, are we falling asleep like the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom while we sleep in our sins? (Matthew 25:1-13)
11. Is it true in our day as it was in Jeremiah’s day that: “The light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil”? (John 3:19)
12. How would you feel if virtually everyone around you was opposing you despite the fact that your job was to warn them of very serious consequences that were coming? Why were they so resistant to Jeremiah’s warnings?
13. Read Jeremiah 11:18-23. Jeremiah’s life was being threatened by his own hometown people. And why was that? Were they tired of hearing his warnings? Were the people of Anathoth prefiguring the story of the people of Nazareth in their rejection of Jesus? Just imagine Jesus living in a town for 30 years; and when He said a few startling words, it upset them so much that they were ready to kill Him! Jeremiah felt like he was a lamb being taken to the slaughter. Jesus had to be whisked unseen through the crowds in order to preserve His life. (Luke 4:14-30)
14. We do not have prophets of God openly rebuking us for our sins. How well did the early Adventist Church do, dealing with Ellen White? They even tried to exile her to Australia! How good are we at taking seriously the words of Scripture and her words? Do we often hear rebukes from our church pastors? Or, even our Sabbath school teachers? Are we doing any things that need to be rebuked today? Or, are we just fine and in great shape?

15. Jeremiah had been warned very early in his ministry even at the time of his call that almost everyone would turn against him. (See Jeremiah 1:19.) Although he was warned by God that they would not prevail against him, it certainly was not welcome news. So, when it started to happen, what was Jeremiah's response as recorded in Jeremiah 12:1-4 (*GNB*)? "Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why do dishonest people succeed?" Does this lament sound familiar? Have you read the book of Job recently? Jeremiah certainly did not understand fully why he was getting such an incredibly bad response even from his own neighbors. Is anything like that happening in our church today?
16. We know that the Devil exists despite the assertions to the contrary of many so-called scholars. And as Seventh-day Adventists, we have the wonderful privilege of learning about the great controversy and all the Devil's accusations against God. Should we be surprised that the Devil is doing everything he can to accuse, defame, and discourage God's friends on this earth? At the end of this world's history, we know the Devil is going to do everything possible—everything that God will allow him to do—to destroy God's faithful people. Will we be able to stand? What do you think the Devil is saying to his associates right now about how to deal with Seventh-day Adventists? Keep them busy doing anything besides focusing on God?
17. Read Jeremiah 14:1-10. As the spiritual condition of God's professed people deteriorated, drought hit the land. People had learned from past experience that when droughts hit, they needed to rush to the temple in Jerusalem and beg God to turn things around. Of course, despite their worship at the fertility cult shrines, they recognized that only God could send the rain. Was God intentionally withholding the rain? Can the Devil send rain?
18. Had God abandoned His people at that point because of their repeated rejection of Him? When one lives in a land where most of the people are subsistence farmers, a drought is a terrible thing. Even the rich people who could afford to send servants out to look for water did not get any. Biblical history tells us that it was the custom for them to rush to the temple to pray for rain. (Joel 1:13-14; 2:15-17) Jeremiah understood—perhaps from his own personal insight but certainly also from the guidance from God—that all they were really looking for was water. They were not interested in truly returning to God. How sad! Jeremiah also understood that it was just the beginning of a lot more troubles that were coming. What was the relationship among their sins, their attitude toward God, and the drought? Was God truly withholding the rain because of their sins? Would a loving God do that?
19. Read Jeremiah 14:10-16. Could it be true that God would tell one of His faithful prophets not even to pray for those people who were fasting and praying for rain? Would God who desperately wants to see them put away their sins say, "I will remember the wrongs they have done and punish them because of their sins"? (Jeremiah 14:10, *GNB*) Would He, "Kill them in war and by starvation and disease"? (Jeremiah 14:12, *GNB*)
20. One of Jeremiah's biggest problems was facing off with so-called prophets who were continually saying that there would be no war or starvation and that there would be only peace in the land. Try to picture the scene. Jeremiah was there speaking starkly about the war, starvation, and death that were coming while other so-called prophets were standing nearby refuting everything he said. How would the people decide who to believe? Should we believe the person who shouts the loudest? Does one look at the people and decide who is speaking for the Lord based on their appearance? God gave Jeremiah messages saying: "The prophets are telling lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I give them

any orders or speak one word to them.” (Jeremiah 14:14, *GNB*) God went on to say, “I will make them pay for their wickedness.” (v. 16) What did God do with those wicked people?

21. First Thessalonians 5:17 tells us to pray without ceasing. Would that include intercessory prayer for God’s enemies? Or, is God telling us only to pray for our own spiritual condition? In Jeremiah’s case, God plainly told him not to pray for those enemies.
22. How do we explain the perverseness of those enemies of Jeremiah?

It is impossible to explain the origin of sin so as to give a reason for its existence. Yet enough may be understood concerning both the origin and the final disposition of sin to make fully manifest the justice and benevolence of God in all His dealings with evil. Nothing is more plainly taught in [493] Scripture than that God was in no wise responsible for the entrance of sin; that there was no arbitrary withdrawal of divine grace, no deficiency in the divine government, that gave occasion for the uprising of rebellion. **Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin.** Our only definition of sin is that given in the word of God; it is “the transgression of the law;” it is the outworking of a principle at war with the great law of love which is the foundation of the divine government.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 492.2-493.0. [Bold type is added.]

23. Would it be fair to replace the word *sin* with the word *evil* in that statement? While we can easily turn to blaming the Devil for all the evils that happen, how many of them are our own fault? But ultimately, there surely is no way to explain the rebellion of Satan which started in heaven with a formerly-close friend of God. Why is the Devil so successful in convincing other creatures—angels and humans—to join his side? Clearly, there is no way to give a rational explanation for sin. What about James 1:13-15?
24. Is it easy to truly recognize the seriousness of sin and its pervasiveness in our own hearts? Do any of us face the kind of opposition that Jeremiah faced? Is it really true that: “Who can understand the human heart? There is nothing else so deceitful; it is too sick to be healed”? (Jeremiah 17:9, *GNB*) Are we naturally sinful and selfish? Or, could we blame our environment? If we are naturally so sinful, what is our hope for salvation? How do we respond when even family members seem to turn away from God’s plan for their lives?
25. Jeremiah spoke about trees planted by a stream or river. In practical terms, what does that metaphor mean? What are the living waters that we need to turn to repeatedly and continuously in order to remain faithful to God’s side?
26. Are we honestly willing to admit that there is no human solution to the sin problem? Are we willing to give up our selfishness and our egocentrism and admit that we need God’s help? Why does sin stick so hard to us? How do we get rid of those favorite sins? **It is impossible to stamp sin out; we can only crowd it out. Something must be put in its place.** We must continually, actively turn our eyes away from the world’s attractions and place them squarely on Jesus Christ and His message of salvation. Remember as we have stated so frequently that, “By beholding we become changed.” (*GC* 555) So, who has our attention most of the time? Honestly now, do we spend more time in learning about God than we do observing and participating in the evils in the world around us?

27. What does it mean to have God's law written in your heart? Tattooing has become very popular in a number of societies in our day. Some people have their bodies almost completely covered with tattoos. What does God say about tattoos? Read Leviticus 19:28. Careful studies show that somewhere around 50% of people who place tattoos on themselves seriously regret it later. And removing a tattoo is difficult, painful, and costly. In some cases it can lead to major scarring.
28. By contrast, how difficult is it to remove sin from our lives? Sin is not so readily visible from the outside. Sin is buried deep in our minds! As recorded in Jeremiah 11 and 12, he discovered the perverseness of his neighbors who wanted to kill him, and it scared him even to the point of wanting perhaps to give up his ministry. But, fortunately for us, Jeremiah kept returning to God. Is it any wonder that he is called the weeping prophet?
29. Read Jeremiah 11:18-23 and Nehemiah 7:27. These two passages were written almost 200 years apart. After the people of Jeremiah's village of Anathoth apparently tried to kill him and even after God told them that He would destroy all of them by war or famine etc., we nevertheless read in Nehemiah that 128 "men of Anathoth" were listed among those who returned from exile. God is indeed incredibly forgiving.
30. Jeremiah 11-20 contain the six so-called confessions of Jeremiah. They are in the form of laments as he struggled with the messages he was supposed to deliver. Sometimes, they almost sound like complaints against God. Fortunately, Jeremiah was clever enough to take his complaints to the one place where he did find help, and that was to God.
31. Read Jeremiah 12:5. Would you find this passage encouraging? As you are struggling to live, would you be happy to hear that it is going to get a lot worse in the future? When the people went to the temple during the drought that came during Jeremiah's early ministry, their prayers to God were almost accusations against Him! (Jeremiah 14:7-9) They seemed to think that God owed them the rain. God responded by telling Jeremiah not even to pray for them! God went on to say to Jeremiah that their wickedness would be poured onto them and that they would be destroyed.
32. In our study from Jeremiah this week, what lessons can we learn for today? Are any of us going through Jeremiah-like trials? Is God just trying to prepare us for the day when that will happen? Are Satan's methods of opposition against God's church more subtle in our day? Could we learn to be like Jeremiah, turning away from all opposition and continually focusing on God's plan?

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Last Modified: September 10, 2015

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