

***Good Word Schedule***  
**“Jeremiah”**  
**October, November, December 2015**

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**Theme: The Prophetic Calling of Jeremiah**

**The Book of Jeremiah**

The book of Jeremiah is remarkable for several reasons.

1. **Canonical status.** The man for whom the book is named was thoroughly vilified by the believers in his own day, and not only by ordinary believers, but by royalty, priests and other competing voices. But in light of events, God's people recognized that Jeremiah was indeed a true prophet, even if he was not accepted as such in his own day. Thus it is part of our canon of Scripture.
2. **An edited book with the marks of editing left intact.** Critics have been quick to argue that certain books in Scripture were written by a variety of authors. Genesis, Isaiah, and Proverbs are some of the best known examples. While Proverbs has left us some marks of the work of later editors, no other Old Testament book reveals so much of the history of its composition as Jeremiah: 1) It contains a mix of first and third person elements; 2) it dates a number of oracles to the reigns of specific kings; and 3) it explicitly marks the last chapter (Jer. 52) as coming from the editors, not from Jeremiah.
3. **A book that mixes the acrid with the sublime.** Jeremiah's venom against his enemies in 18:19-23 contrasts sharply with the beautiful new covenant promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34. How can the same author take us to such depths and such heights?

**The Times of Jeremiah**

According to the prologue (1:1-3), Jeremiah's ministry extended from the thirteenth year of Josiah to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah. The wrenching climax of his ministry came with the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon (586/87), an event which Jeremiah predicted repeatedly. What was particularly angering for the people of Judah was his insistence that they submit to Babylon and go into captivity. In almost anyone's book that would sound like treason, and that's exactly what his accusers said.

How much easier it would have been for Jeremiah if he could have taken a page from Isaiah's portfolio, counseling king and people to stand firm against the (Assyrian) invaders. Both Hezekiah and Josiah instituted significant revivals and led out in the restoration of the Passover feast. But Josiah's reform did not last and the city ended up going into captivity. While Josiah was clearly one of the good kings, those who followed him did not earn that label. For purposes of reference, here is what can be learned about the kings that followed Josiah up through the end of the kingdom of Judah:

## The Last Kings of Judah

**Josiah's sons:** 1 Chron. 3:15 lists Josiah's four sons in this order:

- 1) Johanan (oldest, but mentioned only here in Scripture)
- 2) Jehoiakim
- 3) Zedekiah
- 4) Shallum = Jehoahaz

But the sons did not rule in their birth order. Here is the record, additional names included:

1. **Jehoahaz** (Josiah's #4) = **Shallum**; reigned 3 months (608)
2. **Jehoiakim** (Josiah's #2) = **Eliakim**; reigned 11 years (608-597)
3. **Jehoiachin** (Josiah's grandson, son of #2, Jehoiakim) = **Joiachin** = **Jeconiah** = **Coniah**; reigned 3 months (597). According to the Hebrew Massoretic text, he was 8 years old when he began to reign. But a comparison of 2 Kings 24:8 with the Septuagint (Greek) of 2 Chron. 36:9 indicates that he was 18 years old when he began to reign.
4. **Zedekiah** (Josiah's #3) = **Mattaniah**; reigned 11 years (not the brother of Jehoiachin as in 2 Chron. 36:10; cf. 1 Chron. 3:16 where it is stated that Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) had a son named Zedekiah; 2 Kings 24:17 rightly identifies Zedekiah as uncle to Jehoiachin. **NOTE:** Ezekiel dates his prophecies (8:1; 20:1, etc.) to the exile of Jehoiachin, not to the reign of Zedekiah. In 2 Kings 25:27 Jehoiachin is still referred to as king.

## Jeremiah's Call

The verses that describe Jeremiah's call (1:5-19), suggest that he felt coerced by God. But such an experience is hardly unique among the Old Testament prophets. Note this list, all of which indicate a high level of perceived divine coercion. Of these examples, only Isaiah comes close to a call freely chosen, and even his call could hardly be called "free" given the intense sound and light show that accompanied it (Isaiah 6).

- A) (Exod. 3:1- 4:17) **Moses**: divine coaxing and urging; many excuses in return
- B) (Num. 11:16-30) **The Seventy**: one-time, non-volitional experience
- C) (Num. 22-24) **Balaam**: prophetic dictation (cf. Num. 31:16; Josh. 31:22)
- D) (1 Sam. 19:18-24) **Saul**: non-rational, ecstatic prophetic trance, seemingly imposed for defensive purposes (to protect the innocent)
- E) (Isaiah 6) **Isaiah**: a call "almost" freely chosen

- F) (Jeremiah 1:4-19; 12:1-17; 20:7-18) **Jeremiah**: coerced, overpowered, openly complaining
- G) (Ezekiel 2-3; 24:15-18) **Ezekiel**: coerced, overpowered, but suffering in seemingly unemotional silence
- H) Jonah 1-4) **Jonah**: angry and reluctant (“failed prediction; successful prophecy”)

It is good to remember, however, that all we have in Scripture is the human “perception” of God’s heavy hand. God’s actual role is not something humans can see. Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us that God’s ways are far above ours.

It is also well to note that God seems to deal with the prophets in a singular way. In Ellen White’s day, some were pointing to her forceful way of addressing evil in public as a model for their own aggressive behavior. Ellen White was clear that her prophetic calling did not provide an example for those without such a calling:

“God has not given my brethren the work that He has given me. It has been urged that my manner of giving reproof in public has led others to be sharp and critical and severe. If so, they must settle that matter with the Lord. If others take a responsibility which God has not laid upon them; if they disregard the instructions He has given them again and again through the humble instrument of His choice, to be kind, patient, and forbearing, they alone must answer for the results. With a sorrow-burdened heart, I have performed my unpleasant duty to my dearest friends, not daring to please myself by withholding reproof, even from my husband; and I shall not be less faithful in warning others, whether they will hear or forbear.” – *Testimonies* 5:20 [1882]; repeated in 5:677-78 [1889]

### **Discussion Questions**

1. **Question:** How can one explain the overwhelming harshness of the prophetic messages? Wouldn’t it have been more effective to win by love rather than by fear?
2. **Question:** If Jeremiah explicitly illustrates the work of secretaries, editors, and compilers, is it likely that other biblical books may also have been so constructed, even with no direct evidence in the text?
3. **Question:** Does seeing the human elements involved in producing a book like Jeremiah make it more difficult to preserve a sense of awe and power in the biblical text?
4. **Question:** To what extent can one set the biblical prophets apart in a category by themselves so that their experience is not necessarily seen as normative for ordinary human beings?
5. **Question:** If God gives us a hard task, does it help to know that he will stand by us, making us like “a bronze wall” (1:18) in the face of opposition?

**Theme: The Crisis (Within and Without)**

### **Jeremiah Against the Backdrop of History**

The standard Sabbath School study guide takes this second lesson to survey the history of Israel up to the fall of Jerusalem during the time of Jeremiah. The “theme” for the lesson points to the sad truth that Israel had suffered not only from external enemies but also from internal decay as a result of the allure from surrounding cultures. That was true before the monarchy, during the monarchy, and after. For reference, here is a list of the major epochs in the history of God’s people. Note that BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) are modern devices that enable non-Christians to adopt common dates without confessing faith in Jesus Christ.

**1875 BCE      Call of Abraham**

Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob  
Slavery in Egypt

**1445 BCE      Exodus from Egypt** (dated by some around 1290 BCE)

Wilderness wandering  
Israel in Canaan: Joshua and the Judges

**1050 BCE              United Monarchy Established**

Saul, David, Solomon

**931 BCE              Division of the Kingdom**

Kingdom of **Judah** in the South: Rehoboam and Successors  
Kingdom of **Israel** in the North: Jeroboam and Successors

**722 BCE              Fall of Northern Kingdom (Samaria/Israel)**

Selective Deportation of the Ten Tribes by **Assyria**

**621 BCE              Josiah’s Reform and Discovery of the Law**

**586 [587] BCE      End of the Monarchy**

**Fall of Southern Kingdom (Jerusalem/Judah)**  
Exile and Deportation by **Babylon**

## Discussion Questions

1. **Question:** Why do modern Christians tend to emphasize the continuity of faith (the ideal) rather than recognizing the dramatic impact of sin on God's people as reflected in their history and customs?

**Note:** One of the more astonishing verses in the Old Testament is Joshua 24:2 which indicates that Abraham's own family, perhaps Abraham himself, worshiped other gods. The labels "High Road" and "Low Road" point to the two contrasting ways of looking at the history of God's people. **High Road** emphasizes continuity, the good news, the ideal – like Hebrews 11 does in the New Testament. **Low Road** emphasizes the bad news, the fall from the ideal – like Jeremiah does. See chapter 2 from *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* at the end of this lesson.

2. **Question:** How does one understand the effectiveness of parental guidance when so many examples in the Old Testament show that the children of good men are so often evil and the children of evil men are often so evil?

**Note:** In the early history of Israel, godly Eli was the father of ungodly Hophni and Phineas, while godly Samuel raised two wayward sons. Moving closer to the era of Jeremiah, the alternating pattern in the lives of the kings of Judah is simply astonishing: evil Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah, one of Judah's best kings, but Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh, one of Judah's worst. According to the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Manasseh repented, but his son Amon was evil, choosing not to follow the example of his repentant father. But though Amon was evil, his son was the good king Josiah. Yet none of Josiah's four sons earned the label "good."

3. **Question:** Given the track record of great men (Eli, Samuel, Hezekiah, Samuel), would it be safer simply to have no family at all? That was God's explicit command to Jeremiah (16:1-3).

Chapter 2, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?*  
By Alden Thompson  
[Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2011]

**Behold it was very good and then  
it all turned sour**

*And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good.* – Genesis 1:31

*The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth....* – Genesis 6:5

When I step back and try to picture the sweep of the entire Old Testament, and, in fact, of the whole Bible, I see something very similar to the scene suggested by the chapter title: a

glorious idea that has somehow gone terribly wrong. I would hasten to add, however, that for all the wrongness and evil to which the Bible testifies, a generous portion of good still remains. And what is more, out of the wreckage of this beautiful creation God has conceived something even more beautiful and awe-inspiring: a plan of redemption, a theme that we shall look at more closely in chapter 7.

Because the Bible presents such an intricate tapestry, woven with the evil as well as the good, the horrible as well as the magnificent, a distorted view of the whole is quite possible. In fact, Christians have often shown a tendency to focus on one element or the other. Some have so greatly praised their Maker that they have neglected to take seriously the tragic consequences of sin. On the other hand, some have been so deeply scarred by sorrow and tragedy, that even the glories of a this-worldly sunset can scarcely quench the longing for a better world. The difference between these two emphases can be clearly seen in the contrasting hymn titles: "This is my Father's world" yet "I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home."

Any alert citizen of planet earth can testify that life is composed of the bitter and the sweet, the good and the bad, but it is a rarer gift to be able to enjoy this world while longing for a better one. To claim that this world is absolutely filthy is false. Nor can any sober person say that this little corner of the universe is a beauty spot which has no rival. For the Christian, a balanced view is vital: the thorns must not be allowed to ruin the roses, nor should the roses obscure the thorns. That is a principle which is significant not only for daily living, but equally for understanding the Old Testament.

In Chapter 1, I noted briefly that one can use two rather different emphases in interpreting the Old Testament: the "high road" approach and the "low road." "High road" refers to an emphasis on the "goodness" in the Old Testament, particularly in the lives of the men of God. The most straightforward example of this approach is found in Hebrews 11 where men of great variety and diverse experiences are all marked with the label "faith." By contrast, "low road" refers to the approach which calls attention to the great depths to which humans had fallen, including those people that God claimed as his own.

Because the "low road" approach has been so helpful in enabling me to come to grips with the Old Testament, I tend to emphasize that way of reading the biblical accounts. The "high road" has marvelous potential for immediate inspiration, and perhaps that is why it has tended to predominate in Christian circles. But such an approach does not really prepare one for actually reading the Old Testament stories. In other words, one could become so accustomed to a "high road" diet that reading the Old Testament itself could lead to indigestion! I think that both approaches are possible and useful, yet in actual practice it is difficult to follow them both with equal enthusiasm.

Perhaps one reason why the "low road" approach has been neglected stems from the recognition that the discovery of the shadow side of the Old Testament characters has not always produced positive results. In fact, the sins of the saints have often been turned against Scripture and its God and have been used as weapons to attack the authority of the Word of God. Nevertheless, the "low road" approach is in some ways a two-edged sword which can cut either way. For example, one could turn to any nineteenth century devotional writer who is defending the Bible against its detractors. To the statement, "If your God condones things like that, then I want no part of your religion," he can answer, "But it is precisely that point that vindicates the word of God, for here we have a realistic picture of fallen humanity accompanied by a picture of

a God who stoops to help.” So what is taken as a great hindrance to faith by one man is seen as a pillar of faith by another. The psychological and sociological reasons behind those two opposite reactions to the same evidence are undoubtedly complex and cannot be explored here. But I do think it is important to recognize that there is much in the Old Testament that offends refined tastes. When we ignore those aspects, we lay the groundwork for the loss of faith. We must take them seriously and show how God can bring about his purposes even out of that kind of situation.

The “high road” approach has often led to the aggravation of one more point of tension in the interpretation of the Old Testament, namely, that between those who see the religious experience of the Old Testament as evolving naturally, and those who see it as stemming from divine revelation. Much of the modern scholarly study of the Old Testament is based on the assumption that every aspect of man’s experience is evolving, following principles of natural development. In such circles, then, it has become quite standard procedure to describe Old Testament people as developing from the primitive towards the sophisticated, from superstitious beliefs to a mature, intelligent faith. In accordance with such a scheme, those parts of the Old Testament judged to be primitive are said to be most ancient, whereas the more “developed” parts of scripture are said to be of later origin. Thus the stories of Genesis 2 and 3, for example, are said to be early and primitive because God is depicted very much like a man: he walks in the garden, forms man of the dust of the earth, he operates on Adam and builds Eve. By contrast, Genesis 1 is said to be the very latest (and greatest) theology in the Old Testament, written towards the end of the Old Testament period, because God is depicted as transcendent, quite removed from the mundane affairs of life; he creates by his word and does not get his “hands” dirty with the dust of man’s creation.

## A PARTIAL REVELATION OF GOD

Such an approach to the Old Testament has often been so completely foreign to conservative Christians that we have failed to take it as a serious effort to explain some difficult aspects of the Old Testament. Conservative Christians have often tended simply to quote the New Testament view of the Old Testament and to use the “high road” approach for purposes of affirming faith in God and in his word without seriously attempting to explain the Old Testament. The specter of an evolutionary approach to the Old Testament has often made it impossible for conservative Christians even to listen to scholarly discussions about the Old Testament, to say nothing of actually participating in the dialogue.

At the risk of sounding terribly conservative to some of my scholarly friends and dangerously liberal to some of my conservative friends, I would like to propose, as a first step towards understanding the Old Testament, that we simply accept the scheme of “history” which the Old Testament itself suggests. I don’t think that is asking too much, regardless of whether one assumes a scholarly or a devotional approach to the Old Testament, or whether one happens to be liberal or conservative.

Now if we do let the Old Testament speak for itself, a rather surprising picture emerges; surprising, at least, for one who has been accustomed to taking an exclusively “high road” approach to the Old Testament. Perhaps a brief summary can serve as an outline of the discussion which follows:



1. God creates a perfect world and calls it good (Genesis 1).
2. Man exercises his free will to turn against God. (Genesis 2-3).
3. After the “fall,” God’s beautiful world is marred by repeated outbreaks of sin and tragedy:
  - A. Cain murders his brother (Gen. 4:1-16)
  - B. Cain’s line develops into a hateful and hated race (Gen. 4:17-24)
  - C. Noah’s generation rebels, leading to the Flood (Gen. 6-8)
  - D. Noah’s son Ham mocks his father (Gen. 9:20-28)
  - E. The Tower of Babel shows humanity as still being rebellious (Gen. 11).
  - F. Abraham’s own family worships other gods (Josh. 24:2)
4. With Abraham, God begins a fresh attempt to reveal himself to mankind, to people who now know very little of God’s plan (Genesis 12).

This prologue to the Old Testament is extremely important for understanding what follows, for it sets the stage for all the degenerate and “primitive” acts which follow. Beginning with Abraham, God seeks to reestablish his way in human hearts, hearts which have fallen far from the natural purity and knowledge of the first human pair.

Now right at this point I would like to note a more serious problem that arises out of the “high road” emphasis, namely, the assumption that virtually the full content of the “gospel” was both known and essentially preserved from the time of creation through the line of the “sons of God” (the patriarchal line). Whatever the reasons for that view, it causes real problems when one observes the behavior and ethical standards held at various points throughout the Old Testament period. Christians have always claimed that what one believes about God has a direct impact on the way one lives. In other words, good theology leads to a noble life. If that principle holds true, as I think it must if Christian theology is to make any sense at all, then how could it be that the Old Testament saints had in their possession virtually the complete “gospel” while their behavior falls far short of such a theology? All the evidence from Genesis suggests that Abraham did not consider it wrong to take a second wife. His loss of faith was wrong, something that he himself came to realize according to the Genesis story. But the principle of polygamy is never discussed. In the Jacob story it is even more evident that polygamy is an accepted way of life. By reading between the lines in the light of later Christian standards we can certainly surmise the tragedies caused by polygamy, but Genesis does not moralize about it. To cite further examples, Exodus does not moralize about slavery, nor does the Old Testament grant an “enlightened” status to women.

This tension between theology and ethics evaporates if we read the Old Testament in its original setting and do not insist on finding full-blown New Testament standards everywhere in the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament itself contrasts the many and various ways of the Old Testament with the way of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2) and speaks of the shadow pointing to the reality (Heb. 10:1). Perhaps we could even borrow another famous New Testament phrase: “seeing through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). A type is never as clear as the reality, nor is the shadow as clear as the subject itself. Why then should we insist that the Old Testament be as clear as the New in its picture of God? For all practical purposes, the New Testament contradicts

the claim of a complete Old Testament revelation while confirming that the Old Testament believer had quite adequate evidence on which to base faith (cf. John 5:46-47).

The point of all this is to emphasize that if one is going to understand the Old Testament, one must let the Old Testament speak for itself, something which conservative Christians have had considerable difficulty in doing.

Returning then to our survey of the Old Testament story, I would like to suggest, in keeping with the evidence from Genesis, that Abraham's actual knowledge about God was most likely quite limited. He was a great man of faith who acted on the evidence which he had. And though his knowledge of God was limited, and though he was occasionally unfaithful to that knowledge, he rightly stands as one of the great heroes of faith. The story in Genesis 22 of his willingness to offer up Isaac, the son of promise, stands out as one of the great testimonies to his relationship with his God. Yet right here within this great story of Abraham's faith lies a problem for us if we take the "high road" approach. Biblical narratives detailing the later history of God's people clearly establish that human sacrifice was forbidden. If Abraham already knew that such "killing" was wrong, then why should we commend his faith for his willingness to do what he believed to be wrong? Such an approach puts Abraham and us in an inconsistent position. What would hinder God from coming to me now and asking me to "sacrifice" my child? And how would I know that it was the voice of God if he had clearly indicated to me by other means that such sacrifice was wrong? Would he expect me to disobey him in order to obey him? Not at all.

The explanation lies in the recognition that Abraham was most likely surrounded by a culture which assumed that the sacrifice of the heir was the highest possible gift that one could offer to the gods. It was only that cultural background which made that particular test possible. But interestingly enough, if we interpret the story rather freely, we find in it the very heart of the gospel story, for, in effect, God comes to Abraham and tells him: "Abraham, I appreciate your willingness, but you really cannot offer your son. Only I can offer my son. I will provide the sacrifice – there it is behind you." Is that not what God says at the cross? "No merely human sacrifice can ever be adequate – I will provide the gift that brings peace." Did Abraham see the full story? Through a glass darkly, yes, but probably not in detail. I think that is the message of Genesis 22.

A great number of perplexities that crop up in connection with the patriarchs simply vanish when we recognize that these men had entered a world that had been greatly distorted by sin so much so that the truths which God had originally entrusted to the human family had disappeared or had become greatly distorted by contact with pagan culture. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how an original promise of a Messiah who must die for our sins could have become distorted into the practice of human sacrifice. No proof can be cited for such a development, of course, but such a possibility would certainly be in keeping with the known human tendency to transform the gift of God into a matter of our own works and pride.

## THE PEOPLE OF GOD: RISE AND FALL

If we follow the Old Testament story further, we note that the period of drastic loss of the knowledge of God highlighted in Genesis 3-11 is not the only one of decline and degeneracy. The descendants of Jacob migrated to Egypt where they became enslaved for hundreds of years. The biblical account makes it clear that when the time came for God to deliver "his" people, their

spiritual condition was low indeed. While the knowledge of God had not been completely lost, the book of Exodus does suggest that most of the people had virtually lost sight of the God who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No wonder Moses' position as leader of these people was often quite tenuous; they were always on the verge of deserting this "new" God for the old ones of Egypt. And when this rough lot of ex-slaves finally arrived at Sinai, the laws which God gave through Moses provide clear evidence that these people, cowering in mixed fear and awe about the mountain, were so deeply involved with cruel customs that instant abolition of such customs was out of the question. The best that could be done in some instances was a slight "humanizing" of some of the more barbaric aspects. And I use the term "humanizing" intentionally, for I think the laws of the Pentateuch must be seen, in the first instance, as revealing the kind of people God was dealing with, and then only in the second instance, as revealing the character of the God who had chosen these people. The thunder and smoke, the heavy hand, and the strange customs seen at Sinai, are often cited by God's detractors as evidence against him. Because of the "high road" approach, many Christians also find these aspects troublesome even though they choose for other reasons to remain within the community of faith.

Later Old Testament writers make it clear that when human beings forget God, they also forget their fellow creatures, sinking to cruelty and abuse. So when God seeks to awaken a knowledge of himself in the hearts of people thus degraded and alienated from him, he does not seek simply to make them more "religious," but also to make them more human. Judged by the cultures around ancient Israel, the laws given to Israel show remarkable signs of "humanization." God took this people, in spite of the many barbaric and cruel customs which they had adopted and began to draw them to him. He wished to show them a better way. But if human beings are to be treated as real human beings who possess the power of choice, then the "better way" must come gradually. Otherwise, they will exercise their freedom of choice and turn away from that which they do not understand. I shall return to this point later, for it is a crucial one, but now I simply want to make clear the "rise and fall" of God's people as the Old Testament itself describes it. Up to the time of the Exodus, it is mostly "fall," and that is why the "low road" approach can be so helpful.

Before taking up the question as to why God allowed man to fall so low, I should perhaps draw attention briefly to some other "low" points in the progression of the Old Testament narrative. Have you read the book of Judges lately? Maybe you haven't been brave enough. In chapter 6 we will discuss in some detail one of the frightful stories at the end of the book of Judges, but the whole of that period is one of apostasy, rebellion, and degeneration with very few glimmers of light. If unstable characters such as Samson and Jephthah were the best that God could find for his judges, you can imagine the condition of the rest of the people. At the beginning of the settlement period, even that fine young man Joshua, one who generally occupies a position of honor on the "high road," sometimes acts in a shocking manner, at least when judged by our standards of right and wrong. Take the story in Joshua 10 as an example. When five Canaanite kings had been captured, Joshua commanded his men of war: "Put your feet on the necks of these kings." With a few words about the Lord's continuing presence and assistance, he then killed the kings and hung the corpses on five trees until sundown (Josh. 10:22-27). What would a modern Christian church do with a military leader who treated his enemies in such a way? Reflection on such questions simply emphasizes how far these great men of ages past were

from holding the kinds of standards that we would consider right. Yet these were God's men and God chose to use them. What does that tell us about God? Either that God is very cruel – or that he is very patient. I much prefer the latter alternative, for that is the kind of God I find revealed in Jesus Christ. With that deep Christian bias which I readily admit, I choose the alternative which best fits the larger picture.

Glimpses of two other periods in the history of Israel should be sufficient to give at least the flavor of the Old Testament story. The key names are Hezekiah and Josiah during the period of the monarchy, and Ezra and Nehemiah from the post-exilic period. During the approximately four hundred years of Israel's monarchy, her religious experience was wildly erratic. Some great and good names do stand out, including those of Hezekiah and Josiah, both of whom initiated great religious reforms. Hezekiah's reform and Passover preceded Josiah's by about eighty years and are described at some length in 2 Chronicles 29-31. Why does the Chronicler give this story so much space? Perhaps because in Hezekiah's day, the Passover was quite a novel idea, so novel, in fact, that the priests could not consecrate themselves in time. Levites had to be drafted to help administer the sacrifices (2 Chron. 29:34). The Passover itself had to be delayed for a month so that everything could be done as the law required. The people were so taken with this "new" thing that everyone agreed to extend the feast for another seven days (2 Chron. 30:23).

Now one might think that such a glorious Passover would establish the pattern for generations to come, but how does the biblical record describe conditions when Josiah came to power a few decades later? The Chronicler's detailing of Josiah's own development is most illuminating and deserves a closer look.

As told in 2 Chronicles 34, Josiah's religious experience grew as follows: he was only a lad of eight when he began to reign (v. 1), but he apparently did not begin to "seek the God of David" until he was sixteen (v. 3). What had he been doing for religion before this? Use your imagination. The Bible doesn't say. After *beginning* to seek the God of David at the age of sixteen, he finally decided to do something concrete to establish the faith; he began to break down the idols and destroy the pagan altars, but that didn't actually take place until he was twenty (vv. 3-7). One would think that by now he must have been a devout worshiper of the true God and would have had most aspects of the faith firmly under control. Not quite, for it was only when he was twenty-four years of age that he decided to restore the temple, the official place of worship (v. 8). While the temple renewal was underway, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law (v. 14). The Bible itself does not clearly identify the book that was found, but many scholars think it was the book of Deuteronomy or at least part of it. In any event, Hilkiah brought the book to the king's secretary who in turn rushed it to the king. Whatever the precise contents may have been, the king was greatly surprised and shocked (v. 19). Can you imagine both the priest and the king being ignorant of the book of the law – and that so soon after Hezekiah's great reform? And if the king and priest were ignorant, what was the condition of the average citizen?

I can well remember my reaction when the events of 2 Chronicles 34 finally made an impression on my mind. My "high road" picture of faithful kings, priests, and prophets, who held high the "banner of truth," needed to be remodeled to fit the picture that the Old Testament itself gives. What a struggle it was for God to reveal himself to those people, people who so easily and so quickly fell so far.

Our last snapshot picture from the Old Testament comes after Israel had been dragged into Babylonian captivity, the just reward for her sins as the biblical account so dearly states.

Nebuchadnezzar's final capture and destruction of Jerusalem is usually dated at 586; the first feeble group of returning exiles apparently headed back for Judah in 536, but morale was a problem. After a half-hearted attempt to rebuild the city and the temple, local opposition discouraged the people and they simply let the temple remain in ruins. Finally, around 520, under the inspiration provided by the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, a drive was begun which resulted in the completion of the temple.

We have no biblical narrative which describes what took place during the next few decades. All we know from the biblical account is that when Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458/57, the state of religion was appalling. He and Nehemiah worked together to restore the city walls and the faith of the people. But a most sobering insight is provided by the last chapter of Nehemiah. Ezra had now passed from the scene and Nehemiah has had to return to the court of the Persian king, though the biblical account does not explain why. Upon his return to Jerusalem some twelve years later, which would probably be no earlier than 425, Nehemiah was appalled by the conditions he found. Some of the very reforms that he and Ezra had established earlier had been reversed entirely. Read the story yourself in Nehemiah 13 and you will discover further evidence of the "low road" on which Israel so often traveled! In Nehemiah's absence, the people had given over part of the temple to one of Israel's avowed enemies, Tobiah the Ammonite; the priests and Levites had simply been left to fend for themselves; the Sabbath had been disregarded; and the Israelites were still marrying foreign wives, contrary to God's law. That last point was precisely one that Ezra and Nehemiah had "reformed" earlier.

Nehemiah's response to this multiple threat was vigorous and passionate. In his own words: "I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God" (Neh. 13:25). Tough lines, but perhaps not too surprising considering the circumstances.

Descriptions of the history of Israel often suggest that the Babylonian captivity cured Israel once and for all of the worship of pagan deities and turned her to the religion of law, an emphasis that is altogether too clear by New Testament times. But even that religion of law was not easy to come by. The evidence from the Old Testament suggests that virtually throughout her history, even after the exile, God's people were mostly traveling the "low road." One could hardly accuse Israel of worshiping God wrongly when she was not even worshiping Him at all! But that must have been the case more often than we have been inclined to admit.

After tracing the above scenario, we must now ask the question as to why God would allow such frightful degeneration. Why would he create a world and then let it slide away from him? Why would he choose a people and then not keep them close to him? Those questions have often been asked and they are the right ones to ask. The problem of evil and sin is an ominous cloud over our world. When God's children either cannot recognize or cannot understand his activity among men, they turn away from him. I do not presume to know the full answer, but I would like to suggest a way of interpreting God's activity that has helped me to see the Old Testament and the New Testament as part of a consistent revelation of a good God.

## A COSMIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

The claim of both the Old Testament and of the New is that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and the source of everything good. How could such a God be the architect of this world

with its sin and tragedy? The Bible does not really attempt to answer that question in a philosophical manner, but there are some hints in Scripture that point in the direction of a possible explanation of the course that this world has taken. When these hints are drawn together, a picture of a great cosmic drama begins to emerge. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is perhaps the best known popularization of this drama, but the elements are present in Scripture, and Milton himself draws heavily on scriptural imagery. As the writings of C.S. Lewis attest, the motif is still popular in our modern era.

The drama centers on the great struggle between good and evil, between God and the Enemy of the good. The Old Testament treatment of this drama will be discussed more specifically in the next chapter, but the hints appear very early in the biblical narrative. The serpent of Genesis 3, although more crafty than any of God's other creatures, is somehow also God's opponent, raising questions about God's manner of dealing with man. He claims that God arbitrarily has withheld something good from man. Traditional Christianity has attributed personal qualities to this serpent and has depicted him as the Great Opponent of God, usually under the name of Satan or simply the Devil.

The suggestion of a great cosmic struggle between this Adversary and God is further amplified in the book of Job. The Adversary accuses God of favoritism, implying that God virtually has bribed Job to serve him; remove the hedge and Job's allegiance would simply evaporate. In short, the book of Job sets a drama in which the Adversary attacks the very heart of God's ways with man. If God is to prove his case, he must throw his man Job to the lions, so to speak. Job suffers, argues, talks back to a silent God, but never abandons his faith in God's justice. Thus, through Job's endurance, God's character stands vindicated.

Two additional Old Testament passages, Isaiah 14: 12-15, the famous "Lucifer" passage, and Ezekiel 28:11-19, both suggest further elements in the traditional Christian interpretation of the cosmic struggle. In particular, the aspect of selfish pride is prominent in both of these passages. It requires only a small step to arrive at the two great points of tension in this cosmic drama: the selfishness and pride of the Adversary over against God's self-sacrificing love, a contrast that has been much developed in the Christian understanding of the mission of Jesus.

The New Testament intensifies the focus on this cosmic drama. When the "seventy" returned from their successful mission, Luke records that Jesus exclaimed: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). In addition, both Matthew and Luke record the personal confrontation between Jesus and the Adversary (Matthew 4; Luke 4). Both accounts hint at a cosmic significance when the devil offers the world to Jesus if he will fall down and worship him.

Much additional New Testament evidence could be cited, but for purposes of defining the cosmic struggle, the final book of the New Testament is one of the more important New Testament points of reference. Revelation 12-14, and 20, in particular, throw the struggle into bold relief; the dragon and Michael are at war (Rev. 12:7). The dragon is defeated and cast to earth where he pursues those who are faithful to God's commands (Rev. 12:17). The dragon carries on his warfare through the beast of Revelation 13. The beast and his allies attack virtually every part of God's realm. As the struggle climaxes, its religious character becomes more evident, for another beast follows in the authority of the first, demanding that all should *worship* the image of the beast or be killed (Rev. 13:15). Thus the human family is inevitably drawn into the struggle. Those who refuse the demands of the beast are described as saints who keep the

commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12).

Throughout the book of Revelation the theme of judgment is prominent, a judgment which is ultimately for God and his holy ones and against the dragon and his demons. Revelation 14:6 declares that the hour of judgment has come and in the chapter which describes the final demise of the devil and his angels, Revelation 20, judgment is committed to the saints (Rev. 20:4). The language of confrontation simply dominates the book.

Now it is perhaps noteworthy that where this cosmic struggle is given any kind of content, the enemy accuses God of being arbitrary: in Genesis 3, God is accused of arbitrarily withholding something good from man. In Job, God is accused of arbitrarily favoring Job. Yet interestingly enough, these same passages suggest that God actually grants remarkable freedom: in Genesis, the power of choice and the right to rebel; in Job, the right of the Adversary to viciously attack Job, Job's family, and Job's possessions. In short, the biblical writers seem to present the evidence for a freedom-loving God who has no fears of granting freedom also to his creatures and even to the Adversary himself. But in the context of the great cosmic struggle, when the Adversary accuses God of being arbitrary, the only possible way of putting the accusation to rest is for God to do precisely what he did in Job's case: he must throw Job to the lions. Refusal to let Satan attack Job would simply have left the accusation all the more believable, and the reputation of God's government all the more in doubt. But now let us apply the above suggestions to the interpretation of biblical history as a whole. If the course of history can be seen to be taking place within a great cosmic struggle in which God is accused of governing in an arbitrary manner, then we have a hint as to how we might understand his willingness to create a good world – but then watch it fall into serious decay. Who would be the mastermind of that decay? The Adversary.

The suggestion that the Adversary is in some sense the master of this world as well as the mastermind behind its pain and agony, appears in the book of Job. At least when the sons of God gathered together, the Adversary reported that he had come from the earth. This may also be the origin of the references in the gospels to “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). The devil's willingness to “concede” rulership to Jesus (for a price!) as noted in the temptation accounts also implies a certain demonic lordship over creation. Placing this demonic control in a framework similar to that provided by the book of Job, we can imagine that a good world has been thrown to the lions. Thus, the entire creation must endure a Job-like experience at the hands of the Adversary.

If God's ultimate authority is to be established, then the full impact of demonic rule must be allowed to develop. The “benefits” and “blessings” of demonic rule must be allowed to develop for all to see, if God's lordship is to be finally regained. So just as God had to remain silent during Job's agony, just as he allowed Satan to destroy Job's innocent children, just as God allowed circumstances to deteriorate to the point where Job's wife could say: “Curse God and die,” so it is with the world which God has created. Demonic forces must be granted the right to rule. Man must be granted the right to rebel without the threat of immediate and sudden punishment. And so we have the tragic sequence of Genesis 3-11, a somber reminder of the devastation caused by rebellion, but at the same time, a testimony to a God who loves freedom so much that he even grants us the privilege of ruining our lives and the lives of others.

Yet God has not abdicated completely his responsibilities and control. Just as he set limits on Satan's attack on Job, so he has put some limits on the spread of evil. And just as God finally

broke his silence with Job, so he also came in a special way to Abraham to renew the knowledge of God and to lead Abraham into a new relationship as an example of what a divine-human relationship could mean. But if God is the kind of God who loves freedom, then he cannot force us to grow towards him. Growth can come only as we choose to respond to the divine invitation. That is why the Old Testament stories provide such a mysterious blending of good and evil. In some of the narratives the distinction between good and evil is clear enough: human beings simply failed, revolting against what they knew to be right. But in other cases, divine wisdom apparently saw that man was not yet ready for the next step upward. Reforms cannot be hasty, otherwise all can be lost. For freedom's sake, God had been willing to let the demons have a fair crack at his creation; now God must defeat the demons, the false deities who had inundated the earth.

If we apply this suggested interpretative framework to Abraham's situation, we can see that if God had moved too quickly in his attempt to win the heart of Abraham, Abraham would have had plenty of other "gods" to choose from. He was by no means bound to serve the God who had called him from Ur of the Chaldees. There must have been many things that God desperately wanted to tell Abraham, but he didn't dare. Abraham was not yet ready to move from milk to meat!

Thus when the larger picture of a cosmic struggle forms the background of the Old Testament, I find it much easier to understand the activities of God. It now seems strange to me that the Old Testament God has the reputation of having a short fuse. A God of incredible patience is a much more accurate description. Judged by New Testament standards, life in the Old Testament was often at a very low ebb. Yet God was there – working, inviting, winning.

We must not assume, however, that the upward path was a continuous one once God had come to Abraham. The graph actually looks much more like a roller-coaster ride! Freedom means we may grow or fall, depending on whether we respond to the divine invitation or turn from it. When one of God's children chooses to turn away, the memory of the divine presence can very easily fade completely. Very little time is required to obliterate even important traditions from the human experience. I have known families who have become alienated from the Christian community and have turned away, taking their children with them into isolation. Given a few years of such isolation, the children have no memory of that which had at one time been so important to their parents. So it is with the rebellions and apostasies in the Old Testament. The example cited earlier of the loss of the knowledge of God between Hezekiah and Josiah is almost the rule rather than the exception, more typical than remarkable, though still very much a tragedy.

To summarize the argument of this chapter, we can say that God did create a good world. In this world he placed free creatures. They chose to rebel and align themselves with the Adversary. His attacks on God set the stage for demonic rule, a rule which a freedom-loving God chose to allow as necessary evidence in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The Old Testament gives ample evidence of the impact of the demonic rule. At the same time, however, it testifies to God's patient interest in his own people, a people through whom he hoped to demonstrate to the world that there is a God in heaven who is the source of everything good. God had much that he wanted to show and tell his people. As soon as they were ready, he passed on the good news. The tragedy was that they were so seldom ready. Yet God was still willing to watch and wait. That is the glory of the Old Testament and the glory of our God.



**Theme: Last Five Kings of Judah**

**A Touch of Good, an Avalanche of Evil**

Josiah and his four sons were listed in connection with the first lesson of this quarter. That list is repeated here as a reference point for this lesson.

**Josiah's sons:** 1 Chron. 3:15 lists Josiah's four sons in this order:

- 1) Johanan (oldest, but mentioned only here in Scripture)
- 2) Jehoiakim
- 3) Zedekiah
- 4) Shallum = Jehoahaz

But the sons did not rule in their birth order. Here is the record, additional names included:

1. **Jehoahaz** (Josiah's #4) = **Shallum**; reigned 3 months (608)
2. **Jehoiakim** (Josiah's #2) = **Eliakim**; reigned 11 years (608-597)
3. **Jehoiachin** (Josiah's grandson, son of #2, Jehoiakim) = **Joiachin** = **Jeconiah** = **Coniah**; reigned 3 months (597). According to the Hebrew Massoretic text, he was 8 years old when he began to reign. But a comparison of 2 Kings 24:8 with the Septuagint (Greek) of 2 Chron. 36:9 indicates that he was 18 years old when he began to reign.
4. **Zedekiah** (Josiah's #3) = **Mattaniah**; reigned 11 years (not the brother of Jehoiachin as in 2 Chron. 36:10; cf. 1 Chron. 3:16 where it is stated that Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) had a son named Zedekiah; 2 Kings 24:17 rightly identifies Zedekiah as uncle to Jehoiachin. **NOTE:** Ezekiel dates his prophecies (8:1; 20:1, etc.) to the exile of Jehoiachin, not to the reign of Zedekiah. In 2 Kings 25:27 Jehoiachin is still referred to as king.

The alternating pattern of good king-bad king, mentioned in last week's lesson is further amplified in this lesson. Josiah led out in a great reform, but was unable to pass on that experience to his sons. Furthermore, Josiah's gradual awakening to his spiritual responsibilities is a stunning illustration of the "low road" approach in the Old Testament. Note these steps and the accompanying questions, based on 2 Chronicles 34:

1. **Josiah's reign began when he was eight years of age, but he began to seek the Lord only at age sixteen (34:1-3a). Question:** What was Josiah doing "religiously" during the first eight years of his reign? Apparently he only began to worship Yahweh after eight years as king.

**2. At age twenty, in the twelfth year of his reign, Josiah began an active program of reform in Jerusalem and beyond (34:3b). Question:** Why did it take four years of Bible studies before Josiah began to put his faith into practice?

**3. At age twenty-six, in the eighteenth year of his reign, Josiah sent workers to repair the temple. Question:** What was the status of Israel's central shrine if it took King Josiah ten years to "discover" that the temple was not in use?

**4. During the temple clean-up, the workers "found" the scroll of the law (34:14-15), mostly likely a copy of Deuteronomy. Question:** When the law scroll was read to the king, why was the king so shocked to learn of the curses that were to come on Judah for disobeying the law? Was he unfamiliar with the law up to that point? Apparently so.

**5. The prophetess Huldah apparently knew about the law for she was prepared to emphasize the seriousness of the coming disaster (34:19-28). Question:** If serious repentance on the part of the king resulted in a postponement of the disaster until after his death (34:26-28), could continued repentance on the part of his descendants postpone the disaster further, perhaps even indefinitely?

**Note:** Jeremiah 26 introduces the question of conditionality, a matter that we will take up seriously in Lesson #7. There, early in the reign of Jehoiakim – he began his reign in 608 some thirteen years after Josiah's reform of 621 – Jeremiah promises that repentance and reformation could, in fact, reverse the judgment: "Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you" (NRSV). The KJV uses the word "repent" – in the KJV Old Testament, God repents more often than anyone else. That idea is so shocking to the Calvinist mind that the NIV softens the word to "relent."

The point is that the promise of reversal is clear, and comes after the statement of judgment is declared. Yet even the book of 2 Kings is ambivalent, for though it records the promise of relief as a result of Josiah's righteous reign (2 Kings 22:20), it still sees the results of Manasseh's wickedness as an irrevokable judgment: "Still the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him." (2 Kings 23:26, NRSV).

Remarkably, this statement of irrevokable judgment stemming from Manasseh's wickedness immediately follows the statement that Josiah was the best king ever: "Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him" (2 Kings 23:25, NRSV). It is worth noting that the same book includes an equally exuberant and expansive claim for Hezekiah as the best king ever: "He trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him" (2 Kings 18:5, NRSV).

It is also worth noting that the author of Kings seems to know nothing of Manasseh's repentance as recorded in 2 Chronicles 33:10-20. In the Chronicler's account of Judah's kings, the exile is never attributed directly to Manasseh, probably because it records Manasseh's repentance. Jeremiah 15:4, however, seems to adopt the argument from Kings that the punishment on Judah came as the result of Manasseh's (irrevokable) sins.

### Further Questions for Discussion

1. **Question: Conditional Prophecy.** How does the possibility of "conditionality" effect the value of "prophecy" as predictive?

**Note:** As a result of the 1844 Disappointment, Ellen White makes this striking statement about conditionality:

The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional. – MS 4, 1883, unpublished until *Evangelism*, 695 [1946], and then more completely in 1 SM 67 [1958].

Ellen White apparently sensed that "conditionality" was a difficult concept for devout conservatives. This quotation was never published in her lifetime, indeed there is no evidence that it was even sent to the one who raised the question about the delay. The whole manuscript lay stillborn in the White Estate Files until it was excerpted in the book *Evangelism* (1946) then reproduced in full in 1958 in *Selected Messages*, Book 1.

2. **Question: Contradictions and Prophetic Overstatement.** What goes missing from the message of Scripture if we attempt too hard to eliminate all potential contradictions? Is there a place for prophetic overstatement and/or exuberance, methods calculated to bring the right response to the message?

**Theme: Rebuke and Retribution****Jeremiah's "Confessions"**

For lessons 4 and 5 we will be focusing on a cluster of unique passages in Jeremiah called by scholars as Jeremiah's "Confessions." The title is curious because they aren't really confessions in any traditional sense of the term, unless one sees them as Jeremiah's "confessions" of his innermost feelings.

A more inclusive title, one suggested by J. A. Thompson in his commentary on Jeremiah, would be "Dialogs with Yahweh, Personal Lyrics" (*The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Eerdmans, 1980, 88). In this lesson we will focus on the first four, three of which include the divine response to Jeremiah. Here are the passages, with a brief descriptive tag:

11:18-23: **Vengeance on home-town critics.** The Lord revealed to Jeremiah the plottings of his detractors in Anathoth, Jeremiah's ancestral home. In this instance the Lord promised to punish the critics.

12:1-6: **If you can't keep up with men, try horses.** Jeremiah complains that the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer, but that's not all, for in these short lines he manages to complain about a host of issues and asks the Lord to mete out vengeance. But in contrast to the first lament, the Lord simply tells him to buck up: If you can't keep up with men, how will you keep up with horses?

15:10-12, 15-21: **A bitter, deceptive joy.** Jeremiah rejoiced when God's word first came to him. Yet his pain led him to accuse the Lord of being a "deceptive brook," "a spring that fails." Repent, said the Lord, and I will make you a "bronze wall," an echo of his call narrative in 1:18.

17:14-18: **Don't be a terror to me.** Jeremiah begs for mercy from God and vengeance on his enemies. In this instance, no divine response is recorded.

**Questions for Discussion**

The questions suggested by this cluster of confessions focus on sentiments that seem to fall far short of the resigned, cheerful, even buoyant attitude that is the Christian ideal. In his delightful book on St. Francis of Assisi, G. K. Chesterton lays out the "buoyant" ideal, one that will offer a convenient counterfoil to the complaining Jeremiah:

Rossetti makes the remark somewhere, bitterly but with great truth, that the worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank. The converse of this proposition is also true; and it is certain that this gratitude produced, in such men as we are here considering, the most purely joyful moments that have been known to man. The great painter boasted that he mixed all his colours with brains, and the great saint may be said to mix all his thoughts with thanks. All goods look better when they look like gifts. In this sense it is certain that the mystical method establishes a very healthy external relation to everything else. But it must always be remembered that everything else has for ever fallen into a second place, in comparison with this simple fact of dependence on the divine reality. In so far as ordinary social relations have in them something that seems solid and self-supporting, some sense of being at once buttressed and cushioned; in so far as they establish sanity in the sense of security and security in the sense of self-sufficiency, the man who has seen the world hanging on a hair does have some difficulty in taking them so seriously as that. In so far as even the secular authorities and hierarchies, even the most natural superiorities and the most necessary subordinations, tend at once to put a man in his place, and to make him sure of his position, the man who has seen the human hierarchy upside down will always have something of a smile for its superiorities. In this sense the direct vision of divine reality does disturb solemnities that are sane enough in themselves. The mystic may have added a cubit to his stature; but he generally loses something of his status. He can no longer take himself for granted, merely because he can verify his own existence in a parish register or a family Bible. Such a man may have something of the appearance of the lunatic who has lost his name while preserving his nature; who straightway forgets what manner of man he was. "Hitherto I have called Pietro Bernardone father; but now I am the servant of God."

All these profound matters must be suggested in short and imperfect phrases; and the shortest statement of one aspect of this illumination is to say that it is the discovery of an infinite debt. It may seem a paradox to say that a man may be transported with joy to discover that he is in debt. But this is only because in commercial cases the creditor does not generally share the transports of joy; especially when the debt is by hypothesis infinite and therefore unrecoverable. But here again the parallel of a natural love-story of the nobler sort disposes of the difficulty in a flash. There the infinite creditor does share the joys of the infinite debtor; for indeed they are both debtors and both creditors. In other words debt and dependence do become pleasures in the presence of unspoilt love; the word is used too loosely and luxuriously in popular simplifications like the present; but here the word is really the key. It is the key of all the problems of Franciscan morality which puzzle the merely modern mind; but above all it is the key of asceticism. It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be for ever paying it. He will be for ever giving back what he cannot give back, and cannot be expected [94/95] to give back. He will be always throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks. Men who think they are too modern to understand this are in fact too mean to understand it; we are most of us too mean to practice it. We are not generous enough to be ascetics; one might almost say not genial enough to be ascetics. A man must have magnanimity of surrender, of which he commonly only

catches a glimpse in first love, like a glimpse of our lost Eden. But whether he sees it or not, the truth is in that riddle; that the whole world has, or is, only one good thing; and it is a bad debt.

If ever that rarer sort of romantic love, which was the truth that sustained the Troubadours, falls out of fashion and is treated as fiction, we may see some such misunderstanding as that of the modern world about asceticism. For it seems conceivable that some barbarians might try to destroy chivalry in love, as the barbarians ruling in Berlin destroyed chivalry in war. If that were ever so, we should have the same sort of unintelligent sneers and unimaginative questions. Men will ask what selfish sort of woman it must have been who ruthlessly exacted tribute in the form of flowers, or what an avaricious creature she can have been to demand solid gold in the form of a ring; just as they ask what cruel kind of God can have demanded sacrifice and self-denial. They will have lost the clue to all that lovers have meant [95-96] by love; and will not understand that it was because the thing was not demanded that it was done. But whether or no any such lesser things will throw a light on the greater, it is utterly useless to study a great thing like the Franciscan movement while remaining in the modern mood that murmurs against gloomy asceticism. The whole point about St. Francis of Assisi is that he certainly was ascetical and he certainly was not gloomy. As soon as ever he had been unhorsed by the glorious humiliation of his vision of dependence on the divine love, he flung himself into fasting and vigil exactly as he had flung himself furiously into battle. He had wheeled his charger clean round, but there was no halt or check in the thundering impetuosity of his charge. There was nothing negative about it; it was not a regimen or a stoical simplicity of life. It was not self-denial merely in the sense of self-control. It was as positive as a passion; it had all the air of being as positive as a pleasure. He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the whole problem of the pursuit of pleasure. There undeniably is the historical fact; and there attached to it is another moral fact almost as undeniable. It is certain that he held on this heroic or unnatural [96-97] course from the moment when he went forth in his hair-shirt into the winter woods to the moment when he desired even in his death agony to lie bare upon the bare ground, to prove that he had and that he was nothing. And we can say, with almost as deep a certainty, that the stars which passed above that gaunt and wasted corpse stark upon the rocky floor had for once, in all their shining cycles round the world of labouring humanity, looked down upon a happy man. — G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 92-97 (“Le Jongleur de Dieu”)

### **Questions for discussion:**

**1. Discuss these earthy sentiments that contrast so sharply with the ideal seen in Jesus (all quotations are from the NIV):**

**A. Asking for vengeance on one’s enemies.**

11:20: “Let me see your vengeance on them.”

12:3 “Drag them off like sheep to be butchered! Set them apart for the day of slaughter!”

15:15: “Avenge me on my persecutors.”

17:18: “Let my persecutors be put to shame, but keep me from shame; let them be terrified, but keep me from terror. Bring on them the day of disaster; destroy them with double destruction.”

### **B. Questioning divine justice and goodness.**

12:1: “Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?”

15:18: “You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails.”

17:17 “Do not be a terror to me.”

**Note:** All these above sentiments are well known elsewhere in Scripture. Nearly half the psalms are laments, many of them written with a strong accusatory tone. Even from the lips of Jesus we have the cry of godforsakenness (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Could one say that these seemingly “unworthy” sentiments actually reveal an openness and an honesty with God that is highly commendable? The chapter below is the final one in *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* It addresses the issues noted above.

### *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* Chapter Eight

#### **What kind of prayers would you publish if you were God?**

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” – Psalm 22:1

Whenever I come to the prayers of the Old Testament, I have difficulty in restraining my enthusiasm, for they have for they have helped me greatly in solving two problems of Christian experience and theology. In fact, my study of Old Testament prayers has brought together these two, apparently distinct, but equally thorny problems, and has shown how one is actually the solution to the other. Now whenever two miserable and unhappy people can get together in a marriage which is both a joy to experience and a joy to behold, that has to be good news. This chapter, tells a story something like that.

Now for the two problems. The first one focuses on the psalms; the violence, the self-righteousness, the Godforsakenness, so boldly proclaimed therein. How could inspired writers be so virulent? Is it right for a man of God to breathe vengeance on his enemies? In short, many psalms seem to reflect an experience far from the Christian ideal. For Christians who claim the Bible as the Word of God, the problem is particularly acute, for we cannot simply dismiss a portion of Scripture if it does not suit our fancy. If we wish to remain within that heritage which claims the Bible as the Word of God, we really have only two choices: either we can avoid the difficult parts or we can try to come to grips with them. This chapter will attempt the latter approach.

The second problem is more difficult to define, but it has to do with the polite distance that sometimes separates a Christian and God, a distance that makes it difficult to be frank and open with one’s Maker. I suspect this problem is particularly acute for conservative Christians who have grown up with a deep appreciation of God’s holiness that sometimes borders on fear.

There is, of course, a proper fear of the Lord, but there is an improper fear, as well, one that is closer to panic than to respect. In my own experience, this problem did not manifest itself so much as panic, but as an excessive politeness which left my relationship with him ordinary and superficial. Somehow I felt reluctant to tell God where it hurt and when. I was reluctant to confess to him that I did not understand his ways. If my experience was anaemic, I hesitated to admit it. I somehow felt that I had to keep a smile pasted on my face to show him that I was indeed one of his happy children and that all was going well on earth.

Looking back on that experience, I think I have discovered why I tended to be so polite with God: I would cite a couple of horror stories (Uzzah, the bears and the boys, etc.), a few Proverbs (the “abominations” cf. Prov. 3:32; 12:22; 28:9), a choice morsel from Ecclesiastes (“Be not rash with your mouth. . .” Eccl. 5:2). Such passages, along with a few other oddments from Scripture, all mingled together in the dark recesses of my mind to produce an ominous effect. All these bits and pieces were straight from Scripture, but I don’t recall that they were ever being brought forcefully to my attention at any particular point in time. Perhaps I was just a rather sensitive youngster who tended to over-react to rebukes. I don’t know. But in any event, my selective memory produced a caricature of God which contradicted my polite public confessions of a God of love. In fact, if you had asked me at any time during my experience about the kind of God I served, I would not have breathed the slightest complaint. I served a good God who loved me and cared for me. But in a sense, I was forced to say those nice things about him, for back there in the dimly lit passages of my mind lay poor Uzzah and the forty-two boys; right close by stood God with a big stick. So I developed the habit of being quite careful of what I did and said in God’s presence. My prayers were polite. Any agony of soul was kept well under cover. After all, who wanted to become an abomination to the Lord?

Now bring the two problems together: the violent and passionate words of the psalms and my polite little prayers to the great God of the universe. You can imagine my initial shock when I actually began to read the psalms. Do you mean to tell me that those were God’s men, speaking for God and under the influence of his Spirit? And the Lord did not strike them dead? Such wild prayers and here they were in my Bible! But maybe you haven’t read the psalms lately and need a sample to remind you of the kinds of things that at one time threatened to curl my hair. Let me share with you a few of the more lively examples.

Pride of place must go to Psalm 137:9. Here the psalmist breathes out his hatred against one of Israel’s long-time enemies, the Edomites, concluding his “prayer” with the words: “Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” Then there is Psalm 17, a good one to lay alongside the New Testament story of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14): “Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit (v. 1); If thou testest me thou wilt find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress (v. 3); My steps have held fast to thy paths, my feet have not slipped” (v. 5). Here was a man truly thankful that he was not like other men. Finally there is Psalm 22. One of God’s men had the gall actually to claim that God, had forsaken him (v. 1). Furthermore, this same psalmist bluntly suggested that there was a certain injustice on the part of the Lord, for the Lord had listened to his father’s prayers, but not to his own (vv. 2-6). Such bravery. Such opening of one’s mouth in the presence of God.

I finally awoke to the fact that God’s people had been quite frank with him all along. I had simply robbed myself of a great privilege by letting a few stories and a few lines of Scripture loom large and out of proportion to their worth. If David and the psalmists could be open with



God why couldn't I? And that was the beginning of a real friendship with my God.

## THE PROBLEM OF INSPIRATION

But what about the role of the Holy Spirit and inspiration as it relates to these brash prayers? Even though I was willing to admit that certain parts of Scripture were more helpful to me than others, I was not at all willing to concede that there might be degrees of inspiration, And I would still hold most vigorously to a strong position on inspiration. I reject the view that some of the biblical writers were more inspired than others. Either a man is inspired or he is not. As a conservative Christian, I believe that all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16). That is actually one of the great strengths of the evangelical position, for we cannot be tempted to take out our scissors and snip away that which we cannot understand or cannot accept. Scripture is Scripture and we must continue to grapple with it until we make our peace with it and with God.

How then can we explain those passages of Scripture in which we clearly see a difference in the experience of one writer when compared with another? For example, "Father, forgive them," the famous prayer of Jesus for his enemies (Luke 23:34), reflects an experience far superior to that of the psalmist who asks the Lord to smash his opponents (Ps. 69:22-28). We must recognize that difference or we run the risk of wrongfully appealing to the psalmists to support our perverted passions. I think it is safe to conclude that both the mental and the spiritual capabilities of the various writers of Scripture varied greatly and this variation is reflected in their writings. Yet the quality of inspiration is constant throughout. Perhaps a mundane illustration might help. If I take a stack of wet wood and a stack of dry wood and put the same match to both, what will be the result? One will burn bright, clear, and hot. The other will burn reluctantly, with much wheezing and a great deal of smoke. Both are burning, both have been lit by the same match, but the difference in the quality of the raw material makes a great deal of difference in the fire. One can, however, still get warm by both fires, and for some purposes, the smokey, slow burning fire may even be superior. So it is with God's inspired men. The same spirit kindles them all; some will burn more brightly than others, but the Lord can work through them all. We might be inclined to blame the match for the poor fire. Any fault, however, lies not in the match, but in the soggy wood. And surprisingly, in spite of soggy wood, anyone who so desires can be properly warmed even by that smokey fire. In the classroom I sometimes draw a comparison between biblical writers and the productions of the first-year students in college writing. Our particular grading system calls for two marks to be placed on each composition: one for the content and one for the mechanics. Thus a student who is a creative writer but a poor technician can actually receive both an A (content) and an F (mechanics). With reference to the inspired writers, we could perhaps give one mark for spiritual capability and one for mental. In actual practice, it would be rather difficult to assign marks except in some of the more notable cases such as we have already mentioned from the psalms. And I would hasten to add that God's messengers never fall below a C- (the lowest mark "with honor" in our system) in spiritual or mental capabilities. In other words, some of the Bible writers may be more brilliant than others, but each is bright enough. Some undoubtedly have a deeper experience than others, but each has an experience deep enough to be used by God.

We should also note that the brilliant student may not always be the best one for the job. Average students who really have had to work for their marks sometimes make the best teachers

and the best family doctors. The same holds true of the biblical writers. The varying skills and insights of the various writers can meet the needs of a variety of people. The simple gospel stories may be just what some need, while others prefer to be stimulated by the more complicated logic of the Pauline correspondence. In my case, I needed some really violent prayers from the psalms. So in the end, God's purposes are served very well by the great variety of writers and the differences in their experiences. Through this variety, there is something in Scripture for everyone.

But returning to the "problem" psalms, what is the truth that God is trying to tell me, assuming that he is not trying to tell me to smash my enemies? Quite frankly, I think the great "truth" of many of the psalms lies in the openness and the frankness which characterizes the relationship between the psalmist and God. Even though these men still have much growing to do, they have great confidence in God. They trust him. And they can tell him when and where it hurts.

We should note, however, that there are more signs of growth in the psalms than might first meet the eye. For example, the psalmists are generally quite willing to grant God the privilege of taking vengeance on their enemies. That is not a "natural" human response. Our human tendency is to take justice into our own hands: "If you even touch me, I'll smash you!" The classic biblical example of this burning thirst for vengeance is found in the experience of Lamech, the descendant of Cain: "I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech seventy-seven-fold" (Gen. 4:23-24). That is precisely what happens in all those troubled areas of our world where strife never ceases: a constant battle to strike the last and the heaviest blow, a constant maneuvering to thrust in the last and most cutting word. That is human nature. But the psalmist was willing to leave it to the Lord, a truly remarkable step in the right direction. He may still be seething, but the Lord will have to be the one to even the score. There are exceptions to this pattern, even in the psalms, but it is truly remarkable how the psalmists seem to feel that if they pour out their feelings to God, all will be well.

## PRAYING WITH THE PSALMISTS

So how do I pray, now that I have heard such lively, vivid, and almost disrespectful prayers in the psalms? In the first place, my polite, all-is-well approach has disappeared. I have discovered after considerable reflection, that I had, in effect, fallen into a form of righteousness by works. For when I felt that my feelings were unworthy to lay before the Lord and that my soul was too sordid to appear in his presence, I was essentially telling myself that I had to tidy myself up first before I could come to him. If only those with clean hands and a pure heart can ascend the hill of the Lord (Ps. 24:4), then who will help the sinner? I cannot stifle my feelings of vengeance or my pharisaical pride. Only the Lord can cure ills of that sort. In fact, there is a beautiful verse in Acts that has helped me to see the larger picture. After the resurrection when Peter and the apostles were speaking before the Jewish leaders, Peter declared that God had exalted Jesus "to give repentance to Israel" (Acts 5:31). So repentance is a gift from God! How can I change my heart when I "enjoy" that delicious feeling of revenge that wells up when I have slipped in that biting word? It is a bitter joy, to be sure, but in our strangely human way, we do enjoy our bitterness, our hatred, and our envy. All we can do is ask the Lord to give us

repentance, to take away the bitter joy in our sinning, to make our hearts new in him.

So now I can open my heart to the Lord even when it is deeply soiled – especially when it is soiled – for he is the only source of my help. My prayers may not be quite so polite now, but I serve him with a vigor and a joy which was unknown before. I can tell it like it is, for I serve a great God who has given me the privilege of complaining to him when I feel he has forsaken me. I cherish that privilege and I know it is mine. He has even published a prayer to prove it.

## QUESTIONING GOD

There is another aspect of the Old Testament experience that has greatly enriched my prayer life, and that is the great freedom which God's friends exercise in his presence when they don't understand his justice or if they fear that he might be doing something damaging to his own reputation. Now there are passages in Scripture which encourage caution in our conversations with the Lord, and these have their place (cf. Mal. 3:13-15; Romans 9:20). There is a skepticism that is damaging and destructive and ought to be avoided at all costs. But there is also a healthy doubt that arises from honest questioning, from a sincere desire to know the truth and to see God's kingdom established. It is this latter brand of questioning that is actually quite easily aroused in God's true friends.

One of the most striking examples of such a "skeptical" friend of God is Job. In ordinary conversation we speak of the "patience of Job." But the only place in the book of Job where the "patience" appears is in the first two chapters. Beginning with chapter 3, Job opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth (Job 3:1). And that is only the beginning. During the course of his conversations with his friends, Job says some startling things about his friends and some shocking things about God. For example, when speaking of God he exclaims: "It is all one; therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent" (Job 9:22-23). In fact, I find it fascinating to note how Job is used and quoted in the Christian community, for often the "noble" sayings cited from the book of Job actually come from the mouths of Job's friends, and they had to repent in the end (cf. Job 42:7-9). If, however, we were to read in the church many of the things that Job said in his distress, the assembled worshipers would be horrified. But in spite of all Job's shocking utterances, when the dust had settled, God declared that Job was the one who had spoken the truth; the friends had uttered lies (Job 42:7). That in itself is a striking illustration of how the larger framework of one's thoughts and motives is much more important than the specific words and sentences. Taken at the level of individual words and sentences, it was Job who blasphemed and the friends who praised. But in terms of the larger picture, Job's apparent blasphemy was transformed into truth, while the praises of the friends called for repentance and restitution. When the heart belongs to God, such a skepticism can be a powerful weapon in the service of the Lord.

Two other stories, this time from the Pentateuch, are among my favorites for illustrating the openness that God's friends have towards him. The first story is Abraham's conversation with God over the fate of Sodom. I would highly recommend that you read the whole narrative, but especially Genesis 18:22-33. There we see Abraham's initial reaction when he learned from Yahweh that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was imminent. He was horrified: "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (v. 23). "Far be it from thee to do such a

thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (v. 25). Now there was a time when I thought that anyone who would talk like that to God deserved a slap in the face or something worse. But no. The Lord kept a straight face and was actually willing to bargain with Abraham. He did not strike Abraham dead for questioning him. You see, Abraham was a friend of God and God's friends can afford to talk frankly with the Lord of the universe. It is interesting to observe, however, the telltale signs that Abraham's conscience was gently pricking him throughout this bargaining session with the Lord (vv. 27, 30, 31, 32). Yet that respectful side of his conscience did not deter him from thrusting forward the questions which the skeptical side of his conscience impelled him to ask. And, of course, Abraham's primary concern was for the reputation of the great judge of all the earth. Abraham was a subject of that great judge and he was intent that the reputation of his judge remain absolutely untarnished. What bravery! What loyalty! What friendship!

A similar experience is reflected in Moses' relationship with God. Exodus 32 describes the conversation between Moses and Yahweh after Israel's great apostasy at Sinai. The Lord must have been testing Moses to see if his heart was in the right place when he said, "Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation" (Ex. 32:10). Any normal human being would have jumped at the chance to become the founder of a great nation, and especially if one had gone through the agony that Moses had experienced with Israel. But Moses was no normal human. He was another one of God's friends and his reaction was immediate: "Why Lord? What will the Egyptians say? And remember the promises you made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. You even swore to them by yourself. Repent of this evil and turn from your fierce wrath" (see Ex. 32:11-14). "And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people" (Ex. 32:14). When the right people are skeptical with God at the right time, they can even save whole nations. At least that is what happened when Moses opened his heart to the Lord.

## SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES

In conclusion, let us summarize some basic principles that can be of help in dealing with the problems noted at the beginning of the chapter, first, the violence and crudities in the psalms, and second, the difficulty of being really open with a holy God. As I have suggested, the two problems belong together, for when we realize that the psalmists could address God with absolute honesty, we can take heart and do likewise. But we must remember that the violent language in the psalms is not a reflection of the ideal experience; it is not a reflection of God himself, but rather of his erring children who were struggling with life and death issues in a twisted world. Under the impulse of his spirit, they cried to him, baring their souls in a way that often makes us uncomfortable. But their faces were towards God and he listened, even to their uncultured language. From that we can take courage, for whether our souls are bitter, angry, or depressed, when we come to him, we know that he will listen. And that, of course, is the answer to the second problem, the problem of our polite, arms-length conversations with God. Surprisingly, now that I know that the Lord will listen to strong, even seemingly disrespectful language, that very knowledge often takes the edge off my rebellion. Simply knowing that he can handle my seething emotions is often just the tonic I need to restore my soul to health.

This chapter has described something that is very near to the heart of my Christian experience. Yet even as I bring this chapter and this book to a close, I am aware of the great paradox in the divine-human relationship. As I now reflect on the grandeur and the nearness of my God, his holiness and his friendliness, I feel myself torn between two conflicting emotions. I am drawn by the force of his love, but am forced to my knees by the awareness of an awesome gulf between a God like that and a man like this. It is the tension between a Jacob who desperately clings to his Master: "I will not let you go except you bless me," and a Peter, who falls on his face crying, "Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

But the Lord does not depart from people who pray such a prayer. That is news worth sharing.

**Theme: More Woes for the Prophet**

The theme for this lesson in the standard Sabbath School lesson guide is similar to the one for the last lesson (“Rebuke and Retribution”) in that both focus on the difficulties which the prophet experienced, but without a concerted focus on the way Jeremiah handled these difficulties.

The two “confessions” in this week’s lesson raise some of the same issues as noted in last week’s lesson. But rather than cover the same ground, let’s take the next step and ask how one can move from the point where we express our anger and vengeance to the point where we can actually pray for our enemies – as Jesus did. My suspicion is that when Jesus told us to love our enemies his first concern was not for the enemies, but for ourselves. Something like that is reflected in this observation by Frederick Buechner:

“It is generally supposed that to obey somebody is necessarily to do something for somebody else’s sake. That is a tragic misunderstanding. When Jesus asks people to obey above everything the Law of Love, it is above everything for their own sakes that he is asking them to do it.” – *Whistling in the Dark*, p. 98

But before we address the question of *how* we move toward the ideal, let’s capture the vividness of these “confessions” from Jeremiah. The first one is Jeremiah 18:18-23, cited here in the Contemporary English Version (CEV), the first translation designed to be heard by the ear rather than see by the eye. All tongue-twisters are avoided so that it reads smoothly. If you are in a place by yourself, read these words out loud. They are explosive:

19 Please, Lord, answer my prayer.  
Make my enemies stop accusing me of evil.  
20 I tried to help them, but they are paying me back by digging a pit to trap me.  
I even begged you not to punish them.  
21 But now I am asking you to let their children starve or be killed in war.  
Let women lose their husbands and sons to disease and violence.  
22 These people have dug pits and set traps for me, Lord.  
Make them scream in fear when you send enemy troops to attack their homes.  
23 You know they plan to kill me. So get angry and punish them!  
Don’t ever forgive their terrible crimes.

Also from the CEV is Jeremiah’s lament from Jer. 20:14-18:

14 Put a curse on the day I was born! Don’t bless my mother.  
15 Put a curse on the man who told my father, “Good news! You have a son.”  
16 May that man be like the towns you destroyed without pity.

Let him hear shouts of alarm in the morning and battle cries at noon.  
17 He deserves to die for not killing me before I was born.  
Then my mother's body would have been my grave.  
18 Why did I have to be born? Was it just to suffer and die in shame?

Now to the question of how one moves from such sentiments to a position of quiet trust in God.

1. **Question:** Is it possible to suppress our anger when it actually should be allowed to boil at injustice? Ellen White's interpretation of the "wrath of the lamb" (Revelation 6:16) is revealing:

"How would a father and mother feel, did they know that their child, lost in the cold and the snow, had been passed by, and left to perish, by those who might have saved it? Would they not be terribly grieved, wildly indignant? Would they not denounce those murderers with wrath hot as their tears, intense as their love? The sufferings of every man are the sufferings of God's child, and those who reach out no helping hand to their perishing fellow beings provoke His righteous anger. This is the wrath of the Lamb." – *The Desire of Ages*, 825

From a New Testament perspective it is helpful to note that anger does not appear on any of the New Testament virtue lists. Patience appears on them all. But one passage actually commands anger: Ephesians 4:25-27: "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not make room for the devil" (NRSV). This passage commanding anger can be seen from the perspective of three kinds of anger:

**A. The anger of communication.** This is where Ephesians 4 fits in. It is in the context of communication. Graham Greene puts this quote in the mouth of one of his short-story characters: "In her experience [Marie Duval] it was only when a man became angry that he told the truth." – "An Appointment with the General" in *The Last Word and Other Stories* (p. 148).

**B. Murderous anger.** This is the anger that Jesus condemned in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder' . . . But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment (Matt. 5:21-22, NRSV). In the light of Jesus' teaching and example, we must say that murderous anger is always wrong.

**C. Anger of purity.** Some evils demand an angry response. Perhaps Ps. 139:21-22 would be in that category: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies" (NRSV).

2. **Question:** Can one think of personal examples where an angry outburst was quite justified and/or when it was not justified? Jonah claimed the former, but was pointed toward the latter. After becoming angry at the withered bush, God asked Jonah (4:9): “Is it right for you to be angry?” Jonah replied, “Yes, angry enough to die.”

3. **Question:** Can one imagine Jeremiah’s prayers coming from the lips of Jesus?

4. **Question:** Can one imagine Jeremiah’s prayers coming from our own lips without pangs of guilt and self-recrimination?

5. **Question:** Is it healthier for us to get our anger out in the open rather than trying to suppress it? In that connection these vivid lines from H. A. Williams (b. 1919), Anglican Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge, seem appropriate (cited in *English Spirit*, 229-30):

So shocked are we at the irreverence and so ashamed of the rational absurdity of letting off our aggressions against God, that we repress them so far as God is concerned and appear to ourselves not to feel them. And then we wonder why, after we have prayed so devoutly, we feel so bloody-minded towards poor inoffensive John Smith or sweet little helpful Mary Jones or, more often, the members of our own family. Your wife, you see, has very often to have thrown at her the rotten eggs you really want to throw at God. And the joke is that God is not in the slightest degree taken in by the pantomime by which you deceive yourself. He knows what we won’t admit to ourselves, that the rotten eggs are really meant for him.

When we experience God as a meeting with another to whom we are closely linked as to a father or a friend, then the ambivalence of our feelings is inevitable. It is far better to accept that fact honestly and admit it to ourselves than to repress it. There is great wisdom in Mrs. Patrick Campbell’s warning not to do it in the street and frighten the horses. But that prudent condition observed, if you want to blaspheme, then for Christ’s sake blaspheme. If you want in your prayers to grouse, then for Christ’s sake grouse. If you hate God, then for Christ’s sake tell him you do and tell him why. He will know that these things are the necessary obverse of your love for him and that he is himself responsible for having made you that way. By having the courage of your aggression you will show greater trust in him and greater love for him than by all that “resigned submissive meek” stuff which leaves you to take the hell out of other people, and not least out of yourself so that in consequence there is far less of you to give away.



**Theme: Symbolic Acts**

Symbolic acts can be very helpful, but also deadly. Differences in personalities and cultures can lead to significant distortions. In this lesson we will consider one of Moses' symbolic acts and three involving Jeremiah. In each case, we will ask what the proper application is likely to be, but also what improper applications might come to mind.

1. **Question: The Bronze Serpent** (Numbers 21:4-9). How does one go about determining the proper meaning and application of an ambiguous symbol like the serpent?

**Note:** The role of the serpent in Scripture and in culture is ambiguous. Here are two paragraphs from the chapter, "Whatever Happened to Satan in the Old Testament?" in *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Chapter #3; They speak specifically to the ambiguity of the serpent image:

In Genesis 3, an unbiased reader will strongly suspect the animosity which exists between the serpent and God, pointing in the direction of a full-fledged Adversary relationship. But the serpent figure is, in fact, an ambiguous one in the Old Testament. The serpent attack recorded in Numbers 21 is successfully warded off by Moses' raising a brass serpent, the later symbol of the opponent of God! There is even evidence to suggest that the people began to worship this serpent; thus it had to be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4).

The first clear identification of the serpent as Satan in Judeo-Christian writings does not come until Revelation 12:9. In that passage there is no doubt: the Dragon, the Serpent, the Devil, and Satan are all one and the same. Considering the strong role that the serpent plays in Christian interpretation, it is perhaps surprising that his identity is never really clarified in the Old Testament. An explanation might lie in the fact that in Egypt, the serpent is both a symbol of a good deity and of an evil one. The biblical writers thus could not really develop the serpent motif without raising the specter of dualism or something worse. – *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Energion 2011), 45-46.

The next two symbols, "The Potter's clay" and "Smashing the Jar" stand in a certain tension with each other, pointing, on the one hand, to the possibility of change, but, on the other, to the impossibility of change.

2. **Question: The Potters Clay** (Jer. 18:1-12). How does one know when a situation is hopeless and when God can take a bad situation and make something good out of it?

**Note:** Jeremiah's listeners seem to have taken issue with Jeremiah's symbol that suggested the possibility of change. "It's no use," they said, and continued in their evil

ways (Jer. 18:12). Remarkably, the Apostle Paul seems to have taken this very passage and turned it on its head, arguing for something very close to predestination (cf. Romans 9:19-21)! That is what is so intriguing, challenging, and potentially dangerous about the use of symbols. They can be very helpful, but they can also lead astray.

Two modern quotations have a bearing on this idea of God making something good out of something bad, one from George MacDonald, and one from Paul Tournier:

It is so true, as the Book says, that all things work together for our good, even our sins and vices. He takes our sins on himself, and while he drives them out of us with a whip of scorpions, he will yet make them work his good ends. He defeats our sins, makes them prisoners, forces them into the service of good, and chains them like galley slaves to the rowing benches of the gospel ship. He makes them work toward salvation for us. – George MacDonald, “The Bloodhound,” *The Curate’s Awakening* (Bethany, 1985), 200

The most wonderful thing in this world is not the good that we accomplish, but the fact that good can come out of the evil we do. I have been struck, for example, by the numbers of people who have been brought back to God under the influence of a person to whom they had some imperfect attachment.... Our vocation is, I believe, to build good out of evil. For if we try to build good out of good, we are in danger of running out of raw materials. – Paul Tournier, *Person Reborn*, 80-81, via Philip Yancey, *Reaching for an Invisible God*, 264

**3. Question: Smashing the Jar** (Jer. 19:1-15). From a Christian perspective, is there ever a time when things are hopeless for a person or a community? What are the circumstances that reveal that a fate is fixed? Would the book of Jonah provide some “hope” for apparently hopeless situations?

**Note:** Within the passage describing the smashing of the jar is an intriguing reference to human sacrifice. Jeremiah was taking the jar to the valley of Hinnom because that was where Israel had practiced child sacrifice. Jer. 19:5 states that God had never commanded child sacrifice. But Ezek 20:25-26 states that bad laws including the command to sacrifice their children came from – in order that he might horrify them. That’s a classic theocentric approach which contrasts with the more anthropocentric approach of Jeremiah. One can find both perspectives in Scripture.

**4. Question: The Linen Belt** (Jer. 13:1-11). Is contact with surrounding culture always deadly as this symbolic act suggests?

**Note:** One can think of examples where the God’s people were a blessing to another culture, rather than the other culture being only a curse to God’s people. That was true of Daniel in Babylon. And Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles (Jer. 29:4-23) asks the exiles to pray for the city in which they found themselves. That was no less a city than Babylon.

**Theme: Crisis Continues**

The official “theme” for this week’s lesson is not very revealing, but the primary passages point to two very diverse but significant issues: Israel’s attraction for other gods (Jeremiah 10) and conditionality (Jeremiah 26).

**The Worship of Other Gods**

The Old Testament reveals two different perspectives on other deities. One suggests that “the gods” have a real existence, the other that they are merely sticks and stones. The very first of the ten commandments carefully makes room for both: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). In other words, the decalogue does not exclude the existence of other gods nor is it concerned about the “gods” that citizens of other kingdoms actually worship. What it prohibits is the worship of other gods in Yahweh’s presence.

Some books of the Bible reflect a mocking attitude toward those who are so foolish to worship gods of wood and stone. Jeremiah 10 fits in that category as does Isaiah 44:6-20. The mocking rhetoric is so strident that the average person is surprised to discover traces of the other perspective, namely, the view that sees the gods assigned to other nations. The story of the little maid in 2 Kings 5, for example, pictures Naaman moving away from the worship of Rimmon to the worship of the only true God, the one who is God in Israel. A similar perspective is suggested in 2 Kings 3, but expressed very subtly. There the Israelite soldiers are petrified when the King of Moab offers up his first-born son to his god (Chemosh), and the Israelite soldiers hasten back to Yahweh’s land.

In the book of Deuteronomy, several passages hint at this perspective, referring to “gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them” (Deut. 29:26, NRSV). Most striking in that respect is Deut. 32:8-9. The crucial verse is verse 8:

“When the Most High assigned lands to the nations, when he divided up the human race, he established the boundaries of the peoples according to the number in his heavenly court.” (NLT)

“When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods.” (NRSV)

Following a remarkable Hebrew manuscript from Qumran and the reading of the LXX (Old Testament in Greek, the CEV boldly translates Deut. 32:7-9 as follows:

“Think about past generations. Ask your parents or any of your elders. They will tell you that God Most High gave land to every nation. He assigned a guardian angel to each of them, but the Lord himself takes care of Israel.”

**Question:** How is our understanding of the test on Mt. Carmel between Yahweh and Baal, between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, affected by the knowledge that Baal was understood as much more than simply a god of wood or stone? Would such a perspective make Baal more dangerous or less to the ancient Israelites? More alluring or less?

**Question:** Would seeing the Old Testament gods more like Satan and his evil angels rather than simply as sticks or stones make the stories of the Old Testament more meaningful?

### **Jeremiah 26 and Conditional Prophecy**

The other significant topic from this week's biblical passages touches on the question of conditional prophecy. In Jeremiah 26, Jeremiah tells the people that *if* they don't repent, God will destroy the Jerusalem temple as he did the sanctuary at Shiloh. But if they do repent, "I will change my mind," says the Lord (26:3, NRSV) and again in 26:13: "The Lord will change his mind."

But the people react as if Jeremiah's statement was absolute, not conditional! Only when they remembered Micah's "absolute" prophecy in Micah 3:12 that turned out to be conditional, did they let Jeremiah off the hook. The quotation and application of Micah's prophecy is fascinating:

"Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts,

Zion shall be plowed as a field;

Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,

and the mountain of the house a wooded height.'

Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah actually put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and did not the Lord change his mind about the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster on ourselves!" – Jer. 26:18-19, NRSV.

In other words, a conditional prophecy was heard as absolute while an absolute prophecy turned out to be conditional – and saved Jeremiah's life.

**Question:** Can you think of any personal experiences where a conditional statement was perceived as absolute and vice versa?

**Note:** Children are particularly adept at forgetting stated conditions: "We'll all go to the zoo if you get the garden weeded." But if the promise is retracted because the garden did not get weeded, the children will cry out: "But you promised!"

**Question:** What are the implications of this chapter for the understanding of conditional prophecy in general?

**Note:** An obscure passage in the story of Saul's pursuit of David (1 Sam. 23:6-13) sheds helpful light on the nature of prophecy:

“When Abiathar son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, he came down with an ephod in his hand. 7 Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, ‘God has given him into my hand; for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars.’ 8 Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men. 9 When David learned that Saul was plotting evil against him, he said to the priest Abiathar, ‘Bring the ephod here.’ 10 David said, ‘O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. 11 And now, will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant.’ The Lord said, ‘He will come down.’ 12 Then David said, ‘Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?’ The Lord said, ‘They will surrender you.’ 13 Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, set out and left Keilah; they wandered wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition.” (NRSV)

In short, when the conditions changed, the prophecy no longer applied. Thus we can refer to Ellen White's statement about conditional prophecy:

“The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional.” – MS 4, 1883, unpublished until *Evangelism*, 695 [1946], and then more completely in 1 SM 67 [1958].

**Question:** Could we liken prophecy to a powerful flashlight with fresh batteries? As time passes, the batteries become weaker and eventually cease to function. So with the passage of time and the change of circumstances, prophecies can no longer be expected to be fulfilled as originally given.

**Question:** Are there any prophecies which are not conditional? What about the second coming? The timing is apparently conditional, but not the event itself.

See the article, “Who Can Change the Mind of God?” that follows below.

“Who Can Change the Mind of God?”

By Alden Thompson

*Signs of the Times*, Feb. 1992, 25-27

God is in the business of changing people’s minds, especially the minds of sinners. That’s not surprising. But it is worth a raised eyebrow or two to hear God ask sinners to help *Him* change His *own* mind.

You heard right. God asks sinners to help Him change His mind. Jeremiah 26 tells the story, shedding important light on the purpose of God’s prophetic messages in the Old Testament.

In the chapter, the spotlight is on Jeremiah himself, a prophet in misery, prophesying in a miserable time. The Lord has sent him a bad news/good news message to pass on to the people of Judah. The bad news is God’s threat to destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The good news shines through in the word IF: *IF* the message is blunt enough, suggests God, maybe “they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil ways” (Jer. 26:13 NRSV). It’s an earlier version of Peter’s “patient” God who wants everyone to repent and no one to burn (2 Pet. 3:9).

In this instance, Jeremiah lays down a definite IF, an approach well-attested in Scripture. Moses’ last speech to Israel is perhaps the most notable example: Blessings IF you obey (Deut. 28:1-14), curses IF you don’t (Deut. 28:15-68).

Jeremiah 26 tells us more about God’s use of the IF clause. But before we take a closer look, we should note that God does not limit himself to this one approach. In many instances He seems to drop all conditions, speaking of both doom and salvation *as if* they were iron-clad and sealed, no ifs, ands, or buts.

Prophecies of doom in this mode are easy to spot in the prophets. Micah, for example, on Jerusalem: “It’s all over. Zion will be a plowed field, Jerusalem a heap of ruins” (Mic. 3:12). Or Jonah to Ninevah: “In forty days Ninevah will be destroyed” (Jonah 3:4).

On the positive side, unconditional promises of salvation are also ready to hand. God takes the initiative. Jeremiah’s new covenant promise is a good example: “*I* will write my law on your heart. Your life depends on *my* certain promises, not your broken ones” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The same is true of Ezekiel’s promise of a new heart: “*I* will give you a new heart. And *my* Spirit will make you keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Since promises and threats appear in both modes in Scripture, that is, with the IF and without, it is interesting to note how Christians bring the two patterns together – or keep them apart.

Mostly they have kept them apart. Those who stress Divine sovereignty (e.g. the Presbyterian and Reformed [Calvinist] tradition) focus on the unconditional promises and threats, minimizing the human response. But those who stress the importance of the human will (e.g. the Methodist [Arminian] tradition) have less to say about Divine sovereignty, focusing instead on the IF clauses.

Pushed to their logical extremes, the two approaches seem contradictory, at least at the theoretical level. One world is determined by God’s decision, the other by human effort. If, however, we look at both approaches for their practical, motivational value, they complement

each other, covering the full range of human needs, for as perceptive parents, teachers, and pastors know all too well, what turns one person on, turns another off, and vice versa.

Some crave freedom, others security. Some love a challenge, responding best when they have a hand on the reins. Others are most productive when assured that their destiny lies secure in God's hands.

In our modern world, it is the difference between those who thrive on the uncertain excitement of working on commission and those who need a steady salary: the hard-driving salesman in the showroom, and the faithful accountant in the back room. In a religious setting, it is the difference between the fast-paced world of the evangelist and the more settled parish environment of the pastor.

Remarkably, because of sin, either approach can result in discouragement or carelessness. Those who love a challenge too easily slip into neutral in a secure world. Those needing security become just as ineffective in the face of a challenge.

So God does what every wise parent, teacher, and pastor has to do: He mixes, matches and blends His methods, becoming all things to all people in order to save some.

But now let's return to Jeremiah 26 and look more closely at God's attempt to motivate His people. When Jeremiah first pled with them to change God's mind by changing their behavior, they treated Jeremiah as a traitor. Jeremiah 7 records his attack on their secure world. You can't just say: "The Temple! The Temple! The Temple!" as though it were some magic charm, he warned. You can't kill, steal, and commit adultery while claiming the temple as security. Reform, says God, or I will destroy this temple as I did the one at Shiloh (Jer. 7:1-15).

Jeremiah 26 records the people's reaction. "Treason," they cried. "You shall die!" (Jer. 26:8-9). They liked their safe, secure world, one unthreatened by wicked behavior. Amazingly, they viewed Jeremiah's *conditional* threat as a treasonous certainty, even though he plainly said God was begging them to change His mind (Jer. 26:3). "If you repent," Jeremiah promised again, "God *will* change His mind" (Jer. 26:13).

Suddenly, someone remembered a piece of history, just enough to rescue Jeremiah from the mob. "Wait!" came the cry. "In the days of King Hezekiah [some 100 years earlier] didn't the prophet Micah prophesy that Jerusalem would become a heap of ruins? Yet King Hezekiah didn't put Micah to death. Instead, he turned to the Lord and the Lord changed His mind" (Jer. 26:17-19). Jeremiah 26:18 includes the actual quote from Micah 3:12, a threat of destruction, unconditional and unequivocal. Yet Micah's audience heard the unspoken IF and repented. And the Lord changed his mind.

The same thing happened when Jonah preached against Ninevah. Although he announced unconditional destruction, the people heard God's IF, repented, and saved their city. The NRSV simply says: "God changed his mind" (Jonah 3:10). Jonah, however, was angry. He wanted smoke, even though, as he himself admitted, he knew all along that God would relent if the people did (Jonah 4:1-2).

In the end, a remarkable two-fold conclusion emerges from the prophets: 1. When people are sensitive to the Spirit of God, they hear His IF, even when it is not stated. 2. When they resist, they don't hear the IF even though it is shouted in their ears. Isn't it curious, that those hearing Micah and Jonah responded positively to the unconditional threat, while Jeremiah's listeners resisted the IF? Only when they remembered Micah's unconditional threat did they finally hear the IF and respond.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that as far as God's threats are concerned, all are conditional, even when no IF is included. But what about promises of salvation and restoration? That's a more volatile question, for while all evangelical Christians agree that restoration is certain, the when and how is much debated.

A sizeable number of modern Christians have adopted so-called "dispensationalism," a perspective emphasizing God's sovereignty to the virtual exclusion of conditionality: God's prophecies will be fulfilled, period. Consistent with that position, every unfulfilled prophecy from the Old Testament is expected to be fulfilled *in detail* at the end of time or during the millennium to follow. Even human death and animal sacrifices are said to continue after the second coming of Christ.

If we take the position, however, that the purpose of prophecy is to reform not simply to inform, then we can see every prophetic "restoration" picture as establishing the principle of restoration. The details will differ according the differing needs of each audience. The great restoration pictures of Scripture, Ezekiel 40-48, Isaiah 65-66, Zechariah 14, Revelation 21-22, all confirm the hope of restoration, yet the details differ, sometimes dramatically. Recognizing the principle of conditionality explains why some were not fulfilled in the Old Testament. Yet we don't have to toss them out as contradictory or struggle to integrate every detail into one grand master plan. They simply are God's way of being all things to all people that He might save some. Saving is always God's consistent purpose. That never changes, even when threats of doom seem to overwhelm the promise of restoration.

Finally, I must admit, that Jeremiah 26 has helped me see the glimmer of hope even in the most emphatic pronouncement of doom, for when Jeremiah says that "the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you" (Jer. 26:13 NRSV), he picks loose a thread of hope that apparently was bound fast when King Josiah, just a few years before, discovered the law book in the temple and learned to his horror that the nation was doomed. As told in 2 Kings 22, the prophetess Huldah informed Josiah that Judah's sin was too great. Disaster was certain. But the Lord would postpone destruction until after Josiah's reign because the king had humbled himself before the Lord (2 Kings 22:15-20).

Could the evil day have been postponed permanently by continued repentance? I think so, for Jeremiah promised the people: "The Lord will change His mind." If rattling the saber will wake the people up, the Lord will do it. "Change my mind," He says. "I want to save, not destroy."



**Theme: Josiah's Reforms**

In lesson #3 we documented the gradual nature of Josiah's awakening. Those steps can be listed briefly again here:

1. **Josiah's reign began in 639 when he was eight years of age, but he began to seek the Lord only at age sixteen in 631 (34:1-3a).**
2. **At age twenty, in 627, in the twelfth year of his reign, Josiah began an active program of reform in Jerusalem and beyond (34:3b).**
3. **At age twenty-six, in 621, in the eighteenth year of his reign, Josiah sent workers to repair the temple (34:8ff).**
4. **During the temple clean-up, the workers "found" the scroll of the law (34:14-15), mostly likely a copy of Deuteronomy.**

The discovery of the law marked the year of Josiah's great reform, 621 BCE, a great Passover and a cleansing of everything evil throughout the kingdom, even in the north. But what makes the story of his reform so fascinating is that we have two accounts of his reign, one in 2 Kings 22-23, and one in 2 Chronicles 34-35.

A certain exuberance marks the narratives in both books, but the historical background of each differs strikingly, for some 80 years earlier, Hezekiah had also celebrated a great reform and a great passover, but a passover that is not mentioned at all in the account in 2 Kings. In fact, the Chronicler takes three chapters to tell the story (2 Chron. 29-31) and makes the point that it was in the first month of the first year of his reign that Hezekiah "opened the doors of the temple of the Lord and repaired them" (2 Chron. 29:3). It had taken Josiah eighteen years to get that far!

The Chronicler makes this assessment of Hezekiah's passover: "There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon son of King David of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 30:26). The people were so excited that they decided to extend the feast of unleavened bread for a second week (2 Chron. 30:23).

But if Hezekiah's passover was the best since Solomon (according to the Chronicler), the same author reports this glowing assessment of Josiah's event: "No passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel; none of the kings of Israel had kept such a passover as was kept by Josiah, by the priests and the Levites, by all Judah and Israel who were present, and by the inhabitants of Jerusalem (2 Chron. 35:18, NRSV).

But there is exuberance in the account in 2 Kings as well. After describing some of Hezekiah initial reforms, the author states: "He trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him" (2 Kings 18:5, NRSV). In short, the best king of all time!

Yet the same author is equally enthusiastic about Josiah: "Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him" (2 Kings 23:25, NRSV). In short, the best king of all time!

On balance, however, the Chronicler is more enthusiastic about Hezekiah than about Josiah, whereas the author of Kings is more enthusiastic about Josiah. This is not the place to note all the evidence for such a conclusion since the point here is to focus on Josiah in connection with Jeremiah. But two significant clues can be noted: 1) the Chronicler records Hezekiah's great reform; Kings doesn't even mention it. 2) the Chronicler records a damning assessment of Josiah's behavior at the time of Josiah's death at the hands of Pharaoh Neco. Kings records no such condemnation:

“But Neco sent envoys to him, saying, ‘What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I am not coming against you today, but against the house with which I am at war; and God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, so that he will not destroy you.’ But Josiah would not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but joined battle in the plain of Megiddo.” (2 Chron. 35:21-22, NRSV)

In short, God was speaking through Neco, but Josiah wasn't listening.

### **Questions for Discussion**

- 1. Question:** Does Jeremiah give us any clue as to why Israel had such a poor memory when it came to matters of religion?
- 2. Question:** Does the fact that both Hezekiah and Josiah had to tear down idols and altars to Baal tell us something about the status of religion during the monarchy?
- 3. Question:** Does Jeremiah's famous temple discourse (Jer. 7:1-11) give us any clues to the status of official religion, even after Josiah's reform?
- 4. Question:** What is the link between religious apostasy and social sins?
- 5. Question:** Can we make allowance for exuberance and prophetic overstatement, both on the positive and on the negative sides when looking at Israel's experience?

**Theme: Jeremiah's Yoke**

The official study guide for this week's lesson uses "yoke" in two different senses:

1. A reference to the "yoke" of Jeremiah's difficult life, thus laying the foundation for an immediate application to the modern believer. The memory passage for this week reinforces the point, giving us the words of Jesus in Luke 9:23: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (NRSV)
2. The wooden yoke which Jeremiah used to as a symbol for subjection to Babylon (Jer. 27). The false prophet Hananiah, preaching restoration of the temple vessels and the restoration of Jehoiachin, came up to Jeremiah and broke the wooden yoke, declaring that within two years, the yoke of Babylon would be broken. Jeremiah responded by referring to a yoke of iron – the text does not make clear that Jeremiah actually made another visual aid, but he did refer to a "yoke of iron" (Jer. 28:13). Interestingly enough, Jeremiah gave the message of the yoke to the surrounding nations as well: Edom, Ammon, Moab, Tyre, and Sidon (Jer. 27:3).

**Jeremiah's Difficult Life**

The Lord made life very arduous for Jeremiah, forbidding him to marry and have a family (16:2-4). He was not to mourn or show sympathy (16:5-7). He was not to join in feasting or share in any kind of joyous experience (16:8-9).

**Question:** Is Jeremiah's life a model for all Christians? What about Jesus' attendance at a wedding feast early in his ministry?

**Note:** A melancholy prophet will tend towards a call to melancholy service. That self-denying perspective on religion is shared by non-believers. Somewhat tangentially, Mark Twain (1835-1910) reflected that "popular" view of the disciplined life, even when religion was not explicitly involved. My daughter sent me a card once with this line from Twain:

"The only way to keep your health is to eat what you don't want, drink what you don't like, and do what you'd rather not."

Interestingly enough, the card came from Borealis Press which noted on the back: "We print with soy inks, on acid-free, totally chlorine-free recycled paper, which produces no dioxins in the mill waste." It is remarkable that such a "conscientious" press would feature a quote from Twain that suggests that the only way to prolong life is to live in unhappy self-denial.

A move away from that self-denial perspective can be traced in the course of Ellen White's growth and development. Comparing her narratives on John the Baptist from 1858, 1878, and 1878 yields these results:

**1858** *Spiritual Gifts* 1:29, 30-31: "**John's life was without pleasure. It was sorrowful and self-denying....** His life was lonely. He did not cling to his father's family, to enjoy their society, but left them in order to fulfill his mission" (SG 1:29).

"I was pointed down to the last days, and saw that John was to represent those who should go forth in the [31] spirit and power of Elijah, to herald the day of wrath, and the second advent of Jesus" (SG 1:30-31).

**1877** *Spirit of Prophecy* 2:69: "**John's life, with the exception of the joy he experienced in witnessing the success of his mission was without pleasure. It was one of sorrow and self-denial....** John's voice was seldom heard, except in the wilderness. His life was lonely" (SP 2:69).

**1897** *Youth's Instructor*, 7 Jan. 1897: "**John enjoyed his life of simplicity and retirement.**"

**1898** *The Desire of Ages*, 150: "God had directed John the Baptist to dwell in the wilderness, that he might be shielded from the influence of the priests and rabbis, and be prepared for a special mission. **But the austerity and isolation of his life were not an example for the people.** John himself had not directed his hearers to forsake their former duties. He bade them give evidence of their repentance by faithfulness to God in the place where He had called them"

**Note:** When I shared these comparisons with one of my classes, a student blurted out a marvelous one-liner: "You mean the more Ellen White enjoyed her walk with God the more John the Baptist enjoyed his!" Indeed.

**Question:** How is one to know how to relate to the ascetic impulse, in one's own experience and in the experience of others?

### **Jeremiah's Wooden Yoke**

Jeremiah's use of the wooden yoke apparently came in the fourth year of Zedekiah (cf. Jer. 28:1). That would be 593, some six years before the fall of Jerusalem, but maybe some fifteen years after his "conditional" prophecy early in the reign of Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26).

**Question:** Does the date of Jeremiah's prophecy indicate that the time for repentance had passed? His somber oracle of 8:20 may apply: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (NRSV).

**Question:** Does the finality of Judah's fate tie in with Jeremiah's repeated echo of the divine command: "Do not pray for this people" (7:16, 11:14; 14:11)? Can these repeated lines be instructive for us? Or should the experience of Jonah's call to Nineveh always give us hope?

**Note:** Jeremiah's gloomy prophecies actually have nothing to do with personal "salvation." They all simply focused on whether God's people would need to go to Babylon to learn their lessons there.

**Theme: Destruction of Jerusalem**

**Question:** In the light of the horrible events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem, do you think Jeremiah would have preferred to die, or suffer through with his fellow countrymen?

**Note:** God promised Jeremiah that he would make him a “bronze” wall so that he would withstand the opposition of the people (Jer. 1:18; 15:20). But his death wish is suggested in this anguished quote from his “confessions”

14 Cursed be the day  
on which I was born!  
The day when my mother bore me,  
let it not be blessed!  
15 Cursed be the man  
who brought the news to my father, saying,  
“A child is born to you, a son,”  
making him very glad.  
16 Let that man be like the cities  
that the Lord overthrew without pity;  
let him hear a cry in the morning  
and an alarm at noon,  
17 because he did not kill me in the womb;  
so my mother would have been my grave,  
and her womb forever great.  
18 Why did I come forth from the womb  
to see toil and sorrow,  
and spend my days in shame? – Jer. 20:14-18 (NRSV)

**Question:** What light does the addition of chapter 52 shed on the composition of the book and its acceptance into the canon? It is a parallel with the last chapter of 2 Kings, describing the destruction of Jerusalem.

**Note:** While the addition of the last chapter of the book by the “Jeremiah Estate” can be troubling to those who want to believe that every book of the Bible was written in its entirety by the person whose name is assigned to the book, the fact that the “Jeremiah Estate” flagged chapter 52 as a later addition is significant. The last line of Jeremiah 51 simply shouts at us: “Thus far are the words of Jeremiah.”

The highly unpopular prophet Jeremiah, despised by people and leaders alike during this lifetime, was ultimately seen by God’s people as a messenger of truth. To

make that point clear, the inspired “editors” of the book simply added the text of the last chapter of 2 Kings, the chapter that describes the fall of Jerusalem. Thus they “proved” that Jeremiah spoke the message of the Lord even though he had been rejected during his lifetime.

**Question:** With the temple gone, what were the implications for “regular” worship for those in Babylon? For those left in Palestine?

**Note:** This question has a rich potential for class discussion. What happens when disaster shatters our complacency? Can we learn from disaster or are we destroyed by it? A host of people have told me that the really important things in life they learned through the difficult times. They never would have chosen such trials. But the Lord used them for his purposes.

In that connection we can focus on those familiar lines from the KJV of Romans 8:28, “all things work together for good.” The NIV margin seems to have a much more realistic perspective in a world where so much seems to result in evil: “in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good.” Two of my favorite commentaries on that question – already cited in lesson 6 – are among my favorites, one from George MacDonald, one from Paul Tournier:

**George MacDonald:** It is so true, as the Book says, that all things work together for our good, even our sins and vices. He takes our sins on himself, and while he drives them out of us with a whip of scorpions, he will yet make them work his good ends. He defeats our sins, makes them prisoners, forces them into the service of good, and chains them like galley slaves to the rowing benches of the gospel ship. He makes them work toward salvation for us. – George MacDonald, “The Bloodhound,” *The Curate’s Awakening* (Bethany, 1985), 200

**Paul Tournier:** The most wonderful thing in this world is not the good that we accomplish, but the fact that good can come out of the evil we do. I have been struck, for example, by the numbers of people who have been brought back to God under the influence of a person to whom they had some imperfect attachment.... Our vocation is, I believe, to build good out of evil. For if we try to build good out of good, we are in danger of running out of raw materials. – Paul Tournier, *Person Reborn*, 80-81, via Philip Yancey, *Reaching for an Invisible God*, 264.

**Question:** What role does a sense of place play in our worship today? Can we worship God without a specific worship home?

**Question:** Given the rather modest number of people who returned to Jerusalem after the 70 years were up, was Jeremiah’s promise of a return after 70 years a real event? Was it conditional?

**Theme: The Covenant**

### **Questions for Discussion**

**1. Question:** Given the somber news that dominates the book of Jeremiah, how does one explain the sudden appearance of the new covenant promise in 31:31-34?

**Note:** Amidst the somber messages of warning that dominate the book of Jeremiah, the buoyant messages of Jeremiah 30 and 31 fall like a gentle, drenching rain on a dry and thirsty land. For those who respond to positive motivation rather than negative, these chapters are a hopeful oasis.

God reserves the right to use whatever methods will work to save his people. Even in the New Testament, the honey does not eclipse the vinegar, the carrot does not banish the stick. The last lines of 1 Corinthians 4 are to the point: “What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:21, NRSV)

**2. Question:** How does the new covenant in Jeremiah relate to the earlier covenants (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Sinai) and to the New Testament? Jer. 11:1-8

**Note:** One could argue that God has always had just one covenant. This covenant was adapted to the needs of his people in different ways. Thus one can speak of the covenant to Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, and the covenant to Israel at Sinai. In spite of the beautiful words of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, Jeremiah does not hesitate to remind them of the Sinai covenant which they broke (see Jer. 11:1-8).

Even the “new” covenant of Jeremiah 31 is probably better seen as a “renewed” covenant. It clearly was a covenant to the people of Jeremiah’s day. The only difference would be that the renewal came at God’s initiative, in spite of the bad behavior of the people. Remarkably, Paul in Romans 5:6-10 (NRSV) echoes that same theme of the divine initiative to a rebellious people: “While we were still weak” (vs. 6), “while we were still sinners” (v. 8), “while we were enemies” (vs. 8), Christ died for us.

**3. Question:** Those who call themselves New Testament Christians are inclined to contrast the Old Testament as Old Covenant and the New Testament as New Covenant. Does Jeremiah’s use of the term help us address that issue?

**Note:** The specialized application of the new covenant promise in Hebrews 8, has led some to see the Old Testament as “old” covenant and the New Testament as the “new.” But remarkably, Hebrews 8 is a direct quote from Jeremiah. Still, Hebrews includes these



startling words in 8:13: “In speaking of ‘a new covenant,’ he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.” (NRSV)

Careful attention to context suggests that the two books are using the passage in quite different ways. What is clear from Jeremiah is that the “renewed” covenant was a promise to Old Testament people long before Jesus appeared on the scene.

**4. Question:** Are there any impulses in Jeremiah that would point to a more inclusive perspective, one that would make room in God’s kingdom for more than the Jewish people?

**Note:** The oracles against the nations (Jer. 46-51) and the yoke narrative in Jer. 27, which included messages to Tyre, Sidon, Edom, Moab, and Ammon (27:3) all point to a more inclusive interest. But for inclusiveness, no Old Testament passage is as startling as Isaiah 19:18-25, a passage that places two of Israel’s greatest historical enemies, Assyria and Egypt, on common ground with God’s people Israel:

18 On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

19 On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. 20 It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. 21 The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. 22 The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

23 On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

24 On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.” – Isaiah 19:18-25, NRSV.

**Theme: Back to Egypt**

Jeremiah 40-44 tells the tragic story of intrigue and broken promises. It tells how Jeremiah, against his own counsel and against his own will, was taken to Egypt by the rebels. What is especially interesting is the cross reference from Jeremiah 44 to Jeremiah's temple discourse in Jeremiah 7. The topic is "Queen of Heaven" and how the rebellious Jews said that they would keep on doing service to the "Queen of Heaven" just as they had always done. Here is the verse from Jeremiah 7:18

"The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger." – Jer. 7:18, NRSV

And here is the remarkable statement of their continued rebellion from Jer. 44:15-25. Note in particular how the people insisted that they intended to continue in their rebellion just as they had done all along:

15 Then all the men who were aware that their wives had been making offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: 16 "As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we are not going to listen to you. 17 Instead, we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. We used to have plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no misfortune. 18 But from the time we stopped making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have perished by the sword and by famine." 19 And the women said,[a] "Indeed we will go on making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her; do you think that we made cakes for her, marked with her image, and poured out libations to her without our husbands' being involved?"

20 Then Jeremiah said to all the people, men and women, all the people who were giving him this answer: 21 "As for the offerings that you made in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your ancestors, your kings and your officials, and the people of the land, did not the Lord remember them? Did it not come into his mind? 22 The Lord could no longer bear the sight of your evil doings, the abominations that you committed; therefore your land became a desolation and a waste and a curse, without inhabitant, as it is to this day. 23 It is because you burned offerings, and because you sinned against the

Lord and did not obey the voice of the Lord or walk in his law and in his statutes and in his decrees, that this disaster has befallen you, as is still evident today.”

24 Jeremiah said to all the people and all the women, “Hear the word of the Lord, all you Judeans who are in the land of Egypt, 25 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: You and your wives have accomplished in deeds what you declared in words, saying, ‘We are determined to perform the vows that we have made, to make offerings to the queen of heaven and to pour out libations to her.’ By all means, keep your vows and make your libations!

**Question:** Does this narrative give us the clue to all Jeremiah’s angry rhetoric about the worship of false gods? The people admitted that they knew all along what they were doing and vowed to keep doing it!

**Question:** Does the temple discourse, with its blending of sins against God and humanity tell us why Jeremiah was so irate?

**Question:** How would we, in our modern world, make the case that bad religion makes for bad morality? Does Jeremiah give us any clues that would help us make the case the true religion contributes to high moral standards?

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**Theme: Lessons from Jeremiah**

The official study guide has entitled the last lesson simply as “Lessons from Jeremiah.” A fruitful way of focusing on that theme would be to ask for personal testimonies – around the circle, perhaps – addressing varied perspectives on the book of Jeremiah. Here are several possibilities:

With reference to the book of Jeremiah:

- 1. Question:** What have you found most helpful from the book?
- 2. Question:** What have you found most troubling from the book?
- 3. Question:** What picture of God emerges from the book?
- 4. Question:** What does the book tell us about human nature and the nature of sin?
- 5. Question:** What does the book tell us about the value of ritual?
- 6. Question:** What does the book tell us about hope?
- 7. Question:** What is your favorite passage in the book?