

## BEGINNING AGAIN: PERSONAL DESPAIR AND A SECOND CHANCE

Jeremiah 14—20

### PERSONAL DESPAIR Jeremiah 14:1—17:27

#### When Prayer Fails (14:1—15:21)

Judah had rejected God's call to renewal. Unwilling to follow God's way, the nation had persisted in stubborn disobedience. Consequently, the shadow of doom hung even more heavily over an incurably sick people (cf. Jer. 13:20-27).

#### A drought and intercession rejected (14:1-12)

The setting for the oracle was a great national calamity (cf. Joel 1—2). This tragedy was interpreted in the light of the former oracles of destruction and captivity: God was still at work as sovereign Lord of men and nature calling the nation to repentance and life. Jeremiah, for his part, understood clearly that God was speaking through the drought (v. 1). At that time the people did not have the concept of natural law as an independent universal secondary cause; God was directly involved in all happenings.

Drought was a deadly enemy that affected all the land: Jerusalem (v. 2), the nobles (v. 3), the ground (v. 4), the farmers (v. 4), and the wild animals (vv. 5,6). The poetic description is most vivid! The cisterns are dry; the ground is parched and cracking; farm labour has ceased; the faithful doe has abandoned her young, and the wild donkey, noted for its endurance, stands with glazed eyes. The catastrophe is of unprecedented proportions.

Because of the agonizing circumstances, in a solemn assembly the people lift a communal prayer of confession and supplication to the Lord. Theoretically, they admit their evil ways (v. 7) and beseech the Lord to act for His "name's sake," i.e., "in keeping with His person." Verses 7-9 are an excellent guide for prayer: confession precedes supplication. The prayer acknowledges the "iniquities" of the people, i.e., they had "twisted or bent the norm"; they had "sinned," or literally "missed the mark," and their "apostasies" or "backslidings" had been many (v. 7). After the confession, supplication follows. The formula follows the basic Old Testament pattern: covenant responsibility on the part of the people would open the door to divine forgiveness and favour.

When all else fails, turn to the Lord (v. 8)! After all, was not Israel the covenant people? Was God not still in

God attempted to speak to the people through a \_\_\_\_\_ (14:1).

(drought)

List the two basic elements of prayer found in 14:7-9.

(confession, supplication)

their midst? He was not a "mighty man who cannot save," i.e., a stranger in their midst (v. 9).

A prose section follows: the pious prayer (vv. 7-9) was valid for the repentant, i.e., the prophet Jeremiah, but not for Judah (v. 10). The people "loved to wander," and the Lord did "not accept them." Judgement would come because of their sins. Their confession was not genuine: there was no repentance. The lament was a mere formula used in a temple ceremony; it was not the expression of a life-changing decision.

Then the Lord commanded the prophet not to pray for the welfare of the people (v. 11; cf. Jer. 7:16; 11:14). Honeycutt makes several observations with regard to this strange prohibition.<sup>1</sup> First, not all prayer was prohibited, but only that relative to the people's welfare. It was a refusal to set aside divine judgement: the drought had to be borne. Second, the people sought to establish a relationship with God on a false and shallow basis (v. 12; cf. Jer. 7:26). It is impossible to confess for another person, or to simply pray another into a right relationship with God. Each person must decide to enter that relationship through his or her own will. Finally, once sin and rebellion are set into motion, they work havoc in life. The results cannot be recalled, although forgiveness may be obtained.

### Judgement on the false prophets (14:13-16)

The prophet made excuses for the people: the prophets had misled them (v. 13). God responded saying that the prophets lied to the people; they prophesied falsely by their own authority (v. 14). Although led astray, the people listened to what they wanted to hear! Therefore, both prophets and people would be punished (vv. 15,16).<sup>2</sup> In the passage Jeremiah expanded the catastrophe of drought to include the ravages of war (v. 15). In both cases, the righteous suffer with the unrighteous: all people would suffer the consequences of divine judgement.

### Jeremiah's lament and prayer (14:17-22)

With deep emotion the prophet utters a poetic dirge: the time for prayer seemingly had passed. Therefore, he pours out his grief revealing his deep sorrow over a destroyed people (v. 17: cf. a symbolic, acted oracle). Death and destruction are complete in and out of the city (v. 18a). Confused spiritual leaders who wandered (lit., "traded") about the land had played an infamous part in the carnage (v. 18b). Ironically, both prophet and priest carried on business as usual in a time of unusual crisis.

Then, in prayer, the prophet questions God (vv. 19-22). The excellent prayer reflects the prophet's, not the people's, spirit and understanding. Has Judah been completely rejected (v. 19)? Although the people longed for peace and healing, they knew terror on all sides because of their wickedness (vv. 19,20). In his prayer the prophet recognized divine sovereignty (v. 19), confessed sin (v. 20), remembered the Covenant (v. 21), and trusted in the Lord (v. 22). However, as before, the prayer was not that of the

Prayer is valid for the \_\_\_\_\_ .  
(repentant)

Judah's confession was not \_\_\_\_\_ .  
(genuine)

God commanded the prophet not to \_\_\_\_\_ for the  
\_\_\_\_\_ of the people.  
(pray, welfare)

Judgement would come on the false prophets because  
they \_\_\_\_\_ the people.  
(misled)

Although misled, the people \_\_\_\_\_ to  
what they wanted to \_\_\_\_\_ .  
(listened, hear)

When judgement falls, the \_\_\_\_\_  
suffer with the \_\_\_\_\_ .  
(righteous, unrighteous)

people.

### God's answer and lament (15:1-9)

Repentance was superficial and too late; the intercession of the prophet was to no avail. Punishment was *inevitable!* Even the appeals of Israel's most famous intercessors, Moses (cf. Ex. 32:11-14, 31-34; Num. 14:13-25; Deut. 9:18-20) and Samuel (1 Sam. 7:5-11; 12:19; Ps. 49:6-8), could not avert the coming sword, famine and captivity (vv. 1,2). God's Word was final! At the same time, a new dimension was added to the tragedy: dogs, vultures, and wild animals would consume those slain by the sword (v. 4). Also, to the sins of the people, judgement was pronounced on the sins of Manasseh (cf. 2 Kings 21; 23:26,27; 24:3,4).

Why had intercession failed? The answer came without vacillation: the people had "forsaken" God and kept "going backward"—they had rejected God's way (v. 6). Jerusalem was destined for destruction (vv. 6b-9). God was "tired of relenting!" (v. 6c): the history of Israel since the days of the conquest and Judges had been one cycle after another of sin, punishment, repentance, and divine deliverance. God was tired of the process! Now, since the people would not repent (v. 7c), the "destroyer" (v. 8) would bring "anguish and dismay." The favoured one that bore "seven sons" (cf. 1 Sam. 2:5; Job 1:2) would be bereft: such was to be the fate of Jerusalem (v. 9).

### Jeremiah's lament and God's reply (15:10-21)

This section contains another of Jeremiah's "confessions" (cf. Jer. 11:8—12:6). Although impossible to date precisely, it originated during a time of bitter opposition and fits well into the latter part of Jehoiakim's reign. Verses 10,11 and 15-18 present one of the prophet's most bitter outcries. God replies that Jeremiah needed to repent and be careful to speak that which was of value (v. 19). These verses present a most revealing insight into Jeremiah's personality, and, at the same time, shed light on the nature of the Old Testament prophecy.

*The prophet laments the day of his birth<sup>3</sup> and the task that the Lord had given him (v. 10a).* He preached God's Word and was rewarded by opposition and strife. Also, he had avoided lending and borrowing. The text does not refer to usury but to a practice normal between friends and neighbours (cf. Deut. 23:19 on interest charges). Even without interest, borrowing and lending can lead to hard feelings (v. 10b). Then too, his call experience seemed to him to have been deceptive (v. 11; Jer. 1:4ff.): God had promised to set him for "good" and that he would be consulted in time of distress; however, his preaching experience had been totally contrary to this!<sup>4</sup> The following (v. 12) is difficult to interpret: in the context it seems that Jeremiah doubts his strength to withstand his opposition. Green interprets: "Can iron" (i.e., my strength) "break iron from the north . . ." (i.e., the power of my opponents)?<sup>5</sup>

Indicate the essence of God's answer to Jeremiah's prayer in 15:1-9.

Punishment \_\_\_\_\_

Intercession failed because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Compare your answers with the text)

In Jeremiah's bitter lament, God calls him to \_\_\_\_\_ and to be careful of his \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(repentance, speech)

The prophet \_\_\_\_\_

the day of his \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(laments, birth)

Borrowing and lending can lead to \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(hard feelings)

Is the following statement true or false?

The context of 15:12 seems to indicate that Jeremiah was confident he had strength to withstand his opposition. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(false)

Jeremiah's human frailty has been vividly portrayed; nevertheless, he continued to honestly express his feelings to God, and, at the same time, he continued to pursue the ministry to which God called him. As Job of old, he faltered and stumbled, but he kept on.

The prophet's protest continued: he had been misunderstood and abused. Again he prayed for God's personal remembrance and divine vengeance on his opponents—during his lifetime (v. 15; cf. Jer. 11:20; 17:18; 20:11,12). All of this was because of his obedience to God's words (v. 16). He "ate them" and they became a "joy for him"; however, in four verses (vv. 15-18) Jeremiah revealed his basic problem. Eighteen times he used the pronoun "I," "me," or "my." He had placed himself at the centre of the religious perspective. He was lonely and felt keenly the sense of alienation. In his pain and introspection he even accused the Lord of being "deceptive" like an unreliable brook (v. 18). At times it ran full of water; but then during the dry seasons it completely disappeared (cf. Job 6:16-21). He had interpreted his commission (call) in terms of appreciation and comfort. Since this was not his lot in Kingdom service, he fell into the pit of self-concern and self-pity.

*God's reply (15:19-21).* Now God responds to Jeremiah's prayer. First, he must repent: he must practise what he preaches. His attitude had become one of rebellion. Sin had impaired his relationship with God. Second, he must learn to make proper value judgements, to "extract the precious from the worthless," i.e., the unworthy must go (v. 19; cf. Jer. 6:27—the dross must be eliminated). By obeying these instructions he would become God's "spokesman" (cf. Ex. 4:16);<sup>6</sup> the people might turn to him (ultimate triumph); he would be made the promised "fortified city" and "walls of bronze" (cf. 1:18,19), and God would be with him to deliver him.<sup>7</sup> The reward for service is more service.

### **Divine Instructions and Warnings (16:1-21)**

This passage combines poetry and prose, giving an autobiographical glimpse into Jeremiah's life. The themes of loneliness and judgement persistently relate the chapter to the previous oracles. The close connection with chapter 11:1-14 would suggest a date close to 605 BC.

#### **Forbidden to marry (16:1-4)**

The prophet's life was a symbol of judgement. Custom was exceedingly important in his day, and it was unnatural for a prophet of his age to be unmarried. A large family was considered to be a blessing (cf. Gen. 22:17; Ps. 127:3,4). Jeremiah's sensitive and lonely spirit longed for companionship and the joy of family life.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in view of the impending doom, the prophet was denied permission to marry and have children (v. 2). His celibacy was a living sign of the coming catastrophe and suffering to be experi-

Jeremiah had interpreted his call in terms of \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
(*appreciation, comfort*)

Because of opposition he had become a victim of \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
(*self-pity, self-concern*)

Through obedience Jeremiah would become God's \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ ; God would \_\_\_\_\_  
him, and the reward for service would be more \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(*spokesman, deliver, service*)

enced by parents and children (vv. 3,4). A proper burial was an important oriental custom (cf. Jer. 7:33; 8:2; 9:22; 14:16; 15:3).

### Social restrictions (16:5-9)

Two additional important social customs were also denied the prophet: mourning for the dead (v. 5) and feasting during festive occasions (v. 8). He could not weep nor rejoice with his people. Again, his actions were prophetic symbols or reminders of the coming catastrophe, or divine judgement on a sinful people. To "gash" oneself or to "shave his head" were signs of mourning (cf. Jer. 41:5; 48:37; Isa. 15:2ff.; Mic. 1:16).

### Punishment precedes restoration (16:10-18)

The style is similar to that of Deuteronomy (cf. Deut. 6). The reason for the coming calamity rests squarely on the broken Covenant (vv. 10-13). Therefore, God will "hurl you out of this land . . ." (v. 13; note the wordplay on the name Jeremiah, "Yahweh hurls").

Following the captivity, God promises a new exodus (vv. 14,15). Just as Yahweh delivered His people from Egyptian slavery, so will He ultimately rescue them from the Babylonian bondage. But first they would pay double for their iniquity and sin (v. 18; cf. the Exile and Isa. 40:1,2). The verses are repeated in chapter 23:7,8 and are more appropriate to the context there.

### Universal triumph of faith (16:19-21)

Once again a universal note enters Jeremiah's message: nations will recognize the futility of idolatry and will turn to the Lord (cf. Isa. 45:20-24; Mic. 4:1-4). Yahweh will "make them know" (i.e., have a dynamic experience with Him) ". . . And they shall know that My name is the Lord" (v. 21).

### Miscellaneous Materials (17:1-27)

The section on Jeremiah's personal despair is drawing to a close. Several additional items are included along with the now familiar themes. Although the date is uncertain, it fits well into the latter part of Jehoiakim's reign.

### Judah's sin and coming punishment (17:1-4)

The only hope for the people lay in repentance and trust in the Lord. However, to the contrary, their sin was written with an "iron stylus; With a diamond point . . . engraved upon the tablet of their heart" (v. 1). This type of stylus was used to cut on very hard surfaces and make permanent inscriptions or engravings. The sin was deep seated and indelible (cf. Job 19:24; the heart was thought to be the seat of the will or personality). "The horns of their altars" (cf. Ex. 29:12; Lev. 4—5) represented the ceremo-

Jeremiah was prohibited the customs of

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

*(mourning, feasting)*

\_\_\_\_\_ would precede \_\_\_\_\_.

*(Punishment, restoration)*

Following the \_\_\_\_\_ God promised a

\_\_\_\_\_.

*(captivity, new exodus)*

An "iron stylus" was used to make \_\_\_\_\_.

*(permanent inscriptions)*

The heart was considered \_\_\_\_\_.

*(Compare your answer with the text)*

nial and sacrificial system; externals could not wash away the guilt (cf. Jer. 31:33,34 where God alone can forgive sin). Once again the penalty for Judah's sin was announced as captivity (vv. 3,4). Since the people of Judah refused to serve God in their homeland, they would serve their enemies in a foreign land!

### **A Psalm of contrasts: A wisdom poem (17:5-8)**

The section resembles Psalm 1 and is a wisdom poem. Misplaced trust in mankind results in curses (v. 5); trust in the Lord results in blessings (v. 7). The one who lives by misplaced trust will be like a desert shrub and will not know true prosperity (v. 6). In contrast, the righteous will be like a well-watered productive tree (v. 8; cf. Ps. 52:8; Prov. 3:30; 11:13). Two ways are before men and nations, but only one will be chosen: the way of disobedience or the way of obedience. Judah chose the former, and placed her trust in mankind.

### **The deceitful heart: a wisdom saying (17:9-11)**

This section treats three themes in a proverbial style: the heart is deceitful and weak (v. 9); God alone knows the heart and rewards justly (v. 10); and misplaced trust (i.e., in wealth unjustly gained) is the essence of folly (v. 11).

In Hebrew thought, the heart is the centre of the will or intellect (cf. the modern "mind": Prov. 23:7; Matt. 15:18; Rom. 10:10). Man's will, or conscience, is "desperately sick" (i.e., "a heart problem"): it can be taught that right is wrong, and wrong is right. In fact, it is "deceitful," "corrupt" ("sick" or "weak") and "beyond understanding" (v. 9). The heart is like a Jacob in its dealing with Esau: it cannot be trusted. The only hope lies in God (v. 10; cf. vv. 5,7, 12-18); however, the human condition is one of despair. Misplaced trust in the ill-gotten material gain is folly: it is like a mother bird that gathers a brood not her own; they cling to her while they are young, but leave the foster mother when grown. Life that trusts riches rather than God is unstable and insecure.

### **The prophet's prayer: the hope of Israel (17:12-18)**

In the midst of the insecurity, the prophet looks to the God of Israel, the Exalted One on high (v. 12). The Lord (Yahweh) is the "hope of Israel": God alone is stable, "the fountain of living water," in the midst of sin (instability, v. 13); He alone can heal (v. 14); He alone is faithful, even in the face of unfulfilled prophecies of destruction (v. 15), and God alone is the prophet's hope in "the day of disaster" (vv. 16,17). He concludes the prayer with an appeal for God's judgement on those who persecute him: God was the prophet's hope for personal vindication.

### **The sanctity of the sabbath (17:19-27)**

The style changes from poetry to repetitious prose. From previous oracles condemning legalism, it seems that the passage shifts superficially to the sabbath (legal)

The "horns of the altar" represented \_\_\_\_\_

(Compare your answer with the text)

What two ways are before men and nations?

(Compare your answers with the text)

In what way is man's will "desperately sick" (17:9-11)?

(Compare your answer with the text)

concerns of the post-exilic community as reflected in Nehemiah (cf. Neh. 13:15-22). Consequently, numerous expositors feel that the section is not from Jeremiah; however, this is a questionable conclusion and the position here is that the passage is consistent with Jeremiah's emphasis condemning worship that excludes personal sincerity and faithfulness to God.

The institution of the sabbath goes back to the days of the Exodus (cf. Ex. 20:8; 34:21) with its theological roots in God's creative activity (cf. Gen. 2:1-3). It also plays an important role in Deuteronomy (cf. Deut. 5:12-15) and appears in the writings of the eight-century prophets (cf. Amos 8:5; Hos. 2:11; Isa. 1:13).

Since Moses strongly influenced Jeremiah, the abuse of the sabbath would constitute fundamental proof for covenant violation. As with the other laws, the neglect of the sabbath would result in destruction (v. 27). Jeremiah reminded the people of God's demands and their abuse (vv. 19-22). The sabbath, a holy day (v. 22), i.e., a day set apart or consecrated to God, was originally a day of rest, joy, and renewal. Secular activities were curtailed and spiritual fellowship was emphasized (cf. Isa. 58:13,14). Originally, the Law was instituted as "internal direction," not as a detailed legal code.

A change in the concept of the Law, and sabbath, occurred during the post-exilic and interbiblical periods. Detailed statutes were multiplied and added to the Law, externalizing its observance. Legalism developed and the Law became an end in itself; it was no longer an expression of grace but a burdensome chore to be kept. Salvation was thought to be found in strict observance of the letter of the Law, i.e., man-made interpretations. When Jesus came, He had to remind the religious leaders that the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath (Mark 2:27).

Jeremiah does not fit the pattern of latter legalism. The stress here is on holiness and obedience and is conditional: "if you listen attentively to Me . . ." (v. 24). Work done on the sabbath day graphically illustrated another violation of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:8-11). Jeremiah places the conditional Sinaitic Covenant (Ex. 19-20) as prior and regulatory of the later Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7): David's house would reign over Israel only if they kept the divine Law (vv. 24,25). Otherwise, national destruction was inevitable.

The sabbath is important. It is a day set aside for community (corporate) worship and personal renewal. It is a day when God is to be glorified as Creator (Ex. 20:11) and Redeemer (Deut. 5:15). It is a holy day that will make all days (life and work) holy. To honour God brings honour to His people. To dishonour God (and His day) will bring dishonour to a people.

The institution of the sabbath began during the \_\_\_\_\_.

(Exodus)

The sabbath was originally a day of \_\_\_\_\_,

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

(rest, joy, renewal)

As legalism developed, the \_\_\_\_\_ became and end in itself; \_\_\_\_\_ was thought to be found in the observance of the \_\_\_\_\_.

(law, salvation, letter of the law)

Is the following statement true or false?

Jeremiah makes the Sinaitic covenant regulatory over the Davidic covenant. \_\_\_\_\_

(true)

For Jeremiah what was the importance of the sabbath?

(Compare your answers with the text)

**THE SOVEREIGN WAYS OF GOD AND  
OPPOSITION TO JEREMIAH  
Jeremiah 18:1—20:18**

**God's Sovereignty  
(18:1-23)**

The section (vv. 18-20) forms a unit probably originating in the time of Jehoiakim (ca. 605 BC). It was a time of uncertainty and personal despair for the prophet. He had exhausted all possible human methods in his dealings with the people; meanwhile, the moral and political situation continued to deteriorate. Jeremiah had reached his lowest ebb of personal despondency. Was God defeated? Was there no hope? Into the hopelessness of the human situation, God moved, revealing anew His divine sovereignty.

Chapter 18 is pivotal in the book: hope is born from despair and rests in God. The section contains the last of Jeremiah's formal complaints and introduces the "gospel" of a second chance that becomes the hallmark of Jeremiah's work and that of his younger exiled contemporary, Ezekiel. Chapter 19 deals with the lesson of the broken potter's vessel, while chapter 20 records the people's reactions to Jeremiah's suffering because of these oracles.

**The potter and the clay (18:1-12)**

The oracle treats the sovereignty of God (vv. 1-6); the freedom of man (vv. 7-10); God's appeal to Judah (v. 11); and the people's response (v. 12).

Once again, God spoke to Jeremiah through a common, everyday experience: "Arise and go down to the potter's house" (v. 2; cf. Jer. 1:11,13; 24:1-10). The house, or "factory," apparently was located in the lower southern section of the city, the Valley of Hinnom (cf. 19:2), and included a place to keep and tread clay, a workshop, and a kiln. Jeremiah obeyed immediately<sup>10</sup> and saw three things: the potter, the clay, and the wheel (lit., "two stones," v. 3).<sup>11</sup> The design was "spoiled," or marred, "in the hand of the potter" (v. 4). The unexplained flaw did not make the potter give up. He "remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make."

Suddenly, the revelation dawned (v. 5): God can adjust to the flaw in Israel just as the potter adjusted to the clay. However, the nation, different from the lifeless clay, must repent or "turn back" from its "evil way" (vv. 6-11). If so, God would "relent concerning the calamity,"<sup>12</sup> and do it not (cf. Jonah. 3:10). Nevertheless, practical reality shattered the prophetic revelation: Israel, in her pride and arrogance, rejected God's offer and preferred to follow her own plans (v. 12). Although the nation would fail, the seed of hope (developed later into an individual response, the new covenant, Jer. 31) had been planted. Total pessimism began to give way to a new understanding of the nature of religion (personal response to God) and covenant (a new

What four subjects does Jeremiah 18:1-12 treat?

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*(Compare your answers with the text)*

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When people \_\_\_\_\_, God can \_\_\_\_\_  
concerning the impending punishment.

*(repent, relent)*

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nation formed by personal response to God).

The lessons from the passage are many: there is a new understanding of divine sovereignty, of divine patience and love, of freedom (divine and human), and of divine revelation (God can reveal His truth through the common tasks of men—to those who are sensitive to His direction).

The sovereign God is the great Potter and is still in control of His world (cf. Rev. 19:6). He has a purpose in life for individuals and nations. However, it is not possible for mankind to understand totally His purpose, just as the clay could not comprehend the potter's dream. Nevertheless, we can be assured that His purpose is beneficial for all (cf. Rom. 8:28). Since God's purpose is best, wisdom suggests that man find that purpose and follow it.

Man's freedom always implies the possibility of perverting the Potter's purpose. The vessel was marred possibly by some gritty substance, or some stubborn quality in the clay that resisted the potter's touch. People are not puppets, but are persons with a will to say yes or no to His way. The principle applies to nations, churches, families, and individuals. At the same time, the sovereign Lord is also free: He is free to respond to man's obedience or disobedience in accordance with His divine purpose.

God's patience and perseverance are seen in the remolding process. The marred vessel was not discarded: the clay was reshaped into another useful vessel as seemed right in the eyes of the potter. An explanation of the coming punishment and Exile was projected: God would not totally reject Israel; He would give her another chance. Captivity would not mean total destruction, but discipline.

God's love offers a second chance to individuals and nations. The tragedy is that people frequently see only that which they want to see and are spiritually capable of seeing. Some only see the lowest, the clay, and do not see the potential beauty or usefulness of the common; some only see the wheel, or the spinning, ceaseless round of meaningless existence; some are fortunate enough to see the Potter's hand, and though they cannot explain the ebb and flow of life, are responsive to that touch which makes life purposeful and useful.

### Israel's irrational response (18:13-17)

In contrast to the nations and nature, Israel's response to God's appeal was unnatural and contrary to reason (vv. 13,14; cf. Jer. 2:10-32; 5:20-25; 8:7). The snow of Lebanon and the flowing mountain streams were perennial (v. 14); yet, incredibly, God's people had turned to idols and had abandoned the well-established "ancient paths" (v. 15; cf. Jer. 6:16). Consequently, the land would become a "desolation," (a "horror," RSV). An "east wind," a sirocco, would "scatter them." At that time of "calamity," since they had turned away from God, He would turn His "back," not His "face," to their plight (v. 17).

### The plot against Jeremiah (18:18-23)

The growing hostility to Jeremiah's ministry erupted

God can \_\_\_\_\_ His truth through \_\_\_\_\_ tasks.

(*reveal, common*)

God's purpose is \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_.

(*beneficial, all*)

God's \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are seen in the \_\_\_\_\_ process.

(*patience, perseverance, remolding*)

Are the following statements true or false?

God would totally reject Israel. \_\_\_\_\_

Captivity would mean total destruction for Judah.

(*false, false*)

God's love offers a \_\_\_\_\_.

(*second chance*)

Israel's response was \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to reason.

(*unnatural, contrary*)

UNDERLINE the correct answer.

An east wind, west wind is called a sirocco.

(*east wind*)

in a new plot against his life (v. 18; cf. Jer. 11:18—12:6; 15:15-21). The religious leadership, object of continued prophetic criticism (cf. Jer. 2:8; 4:9,10; 5:30,31; 6:13-15; 8:8,9; 14:13-16), now united in opposition against the prophet.<sup>13</sup>

The religious leaders were satisfied with their current state of knowledge and considered Jeremiah to be a threat to the established order: he must be removed (cf. the situation in Jesus' day). Jeremiah, on his part, reacted promptly and sought divine vindication and retribution on his foes (vv. 19-23). First, the prophet's prayer looked inward (vv. 19,20), and then he directed his fury against his enemies (vv. 21-23). This is the most passionate of his imprecatory prayers (cf. Jer. 11:20; 12:3; 15:15; 17:14-18; 20:4-6) and presents problems for the Christian by its bitterness against his enemies (v. 21). Although not attempting to justify the prophet's attitude, Green helps understand the passage by observing three factors.<sup>14</sup> First, Jeremiah never enjoyed evident success in his ministry. He was constantly opposed by government, religious leadership and family. He was constantly constrained to preach judgement when he longed to preach peace. Second, "he thought concretely, not abstractly." He did not distinguish between sin and the sinner. He felt his foes were opposing God. His prayer then was more than personal bitterness against personal enemies: he was asking God to vindicate the divine cause. Third, Jeremiah never referred to a belief in a future life. Since the Old Testament majors on earthly retribution, Jeremiah wanted to see the vindication here. The clear assurance of a final judgement awaited the coming of Jesus: Christ does make a difference!

### A Parable and Imprisonment (19:1—20:18)

#### The parable of the potter's pitcher (19:1-13)

The next oracle is related to the potter-house revelation and is an acted parable. This time Jeremiah is commanded to buy an expensive "potter's earthenware jar" (*bakbuk*), a water decanter with a long, narrow, delicate neck (v. 1). Along with "some . . . elders" and "senior priests," he went to the "valley of Ben-hinnom" by the "entrance of the potsherd gate" (v. 2). Verses 3-9 seem to be a summary substantially of chapter 7:31-33. The valley of Ben-hinnom, or Topheth (v. 6), was infamous as a place where human sacrifices had been offered to Baal (v. 4; cf. Jer. 32:35, Molech). There the prophet was to break (smash) the expensive flask in the sight of the leaders (v. 10), and to pronounce judgement on Jerusalem (vv. 11-13). Repentance had been rejected (Jer. 18:12); the pliable clay had not responded to the divine hand. Instead, the people (nation) had become hardened in sin just as the flask had hardened in the heat of the kiln. When thrown upon the rocky soil of Topheth, the expensive earthenware jar was shattered beyond repair. God's patience had run out: now

According to footnote 13 religious opposition came from \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

(*prophets, priests, sages*)

According to Green, name three factors that help us understand the bitterness of Jeremiah's prayer in 18:19-23.

Lack of \_\_\_\_\_

He thought \_\_\_\_\_

He never \_\_\_\_\_

(*Compare your answers with the text*)

What contrast is made between 18:1-12 and 19:3-9?

(*soft pliable clay could be remolded; hard baked clay shattered*)

grace gave way to wrath. Doom was inescapable, and irreparable would be the damage facing the nation and cult.

### The sermon and imprisonment (19:14—20:6)

From Topheth, Jeremiah went to the Temple and proclaimed the same message of national calamity to the congregation there (19:14,15). Pashur (not the same as in 21:1 and 38:1), the priest in charge of the Temple, reacted viciously: Jeremiah was beaten for the first time and placed in stocks (20:1,2). When released, the prophet was resentful of the affront to his own person and God's majesty. He renamed the priest "Magor-missabib," i.e., "terror on every side" (v. 3). The Babylonian victory would prove how false was the priest's message of security. Furthermore, Pashur and his family would suffer exile and death in Babylon (vv. 4-6).

### Jeremiah's bitter complaint (20:7-18)

This is the last of the "confessions" of the prophet. Here he felt again that his freedom had been violated: "Thou hast deceived me . . ." (v. 7a). The non-fulfillment of his prophecies led to ridicule and "derision" (vv. 7b-8). The desire to quit returned (v. 9a); however, he accepted his call. The conviction was "like a burning fire shut up" in his bones that he could not contain (v. 9). Denounced by his trusted friends (v. 10), he turned to the Lord as his "dread champion" (v. 11). Despite his adversity he still praised God as the One who delivered him (v. 13).

Jeremiah finally learned to live with despair (vv. 14-18). Although he cursed the day of his birth in perhaps his most pessimistic passage, he faced reality and learned to live creatively with his burden. His despair is reminiscent of the lament found in Job (cf. Job 3:10,11,16).

How can adversity be faced constructively? Jeremiah suggests that it must be faced honestly. Also, the assurance of following God's sovereign purpose instills confidence when facing difficulties. Additionally, commitment to the divine will, in spite of human misunderstandings, leads to an assurance of the divine Presence. Consequently, life can be lived victoriously in face of contradictions.

This is the last of the "confessions" of Jeremiah. In summing up, there are several clear reasons for the prophet's sense of frustration and failure:

1. He felt that he had been drafted into his ministry (1:4-7).
2. He deeply felt the tragedy of Josiah's untimely death and the failure of the reform movement (cf. 22:15-16).
3. He felt betrayed by family and friends (cf. 11:18-20).
4. He was forced to preach judgement which was contrary to his sensitive nature (cf. 15:10).
5. He was commanded not to pray for the welfare of his people (cf. 14:11ff.).
6. He faced a prolonged delay in the fulfillment of his

MATCH the following:

Pashur	"terror on every side"
Topheth	priest
Magor-missabib	Valley of Ben-hinnom

(Compare your answers with the text)

\_\_\_\_\_, the priest, reacted viciously;

Jeremiah was \_\_\_\_\_ and placed in

\_\_\_\_\_.  
(Pashur, beaten, stocks)

Adversity must be faced \_\_\_\_\_; following  
God's will instills \_\_\_\_\_;  
\_\_\_\_\_ to God's will leads to the  
assurance of the divine \_\_\_\_\_.

(honestly, confidence, commitment, Presence)

prophetic message (cf. 17:15).

7. The prosperity of the wicked concerned him (cf. 12:1,2), while he suffered for his integrity (12:3).
8. The enforced isolation from his people and the corresponding loneliness was an additional source of deep frustration (cf. 16:1-8).

Jeremiah reacted variously to his situation:

1. He longed to escape (cf. 9:2).
2. He resorted to self-pity (cf. 20:7-18).
3. At times, he bitterly denounced his foes and called for divine judgement on them (cf. 12:3; 17:18; 18:19-23).

Finally, what steps did God take to remedy the prophet's disillusionment?

1. God revealed to him that He, too, suffers for sin and rebellion (cf. 12:7-9).
2. Jeremiah received the assurance of God's ultimate victory (30:3).
3. God challenged Jeremiah to be a man (12:5).
4. God called on Jeremiah to repent. His introspection had limited his understanding of God's purpose in history (15:15-21).

Indicate three ways Jeremiah reacted to his ministry.

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*(Compare your answers with the text)*

What four steps did God take to remedy the prophet's disillusionment?

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*(Compare your answers with the text)*

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., *Jeremiah: Witness under Pressure* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1981), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup>Jeremiah frequently came into conflict with the "false prophets" of his day: cf. Jeremiah 2:8; 5:30ff.; 6:13-15; 8:10-12; 23:9-40; 28; cf. James Leo Green, "Jeremiah," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6, ed. by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 90.

<sup>3</sup>The mother who bore seven sons was to lose them (v. 9); why had not his mother lost him at birth?

<sup>4</sup>Verse 11 is difficult to translate. The RSV follows the LXX and Old Latin: "So let it be, O Lord," (i.e., amen to their curses) "if I have not entreated thee for their good, if I have not pleaded with thee on behalf of the enemy in the time of trouble, and in the time of distress!" The MT begins: "The Lord said . . ."

<sup>5</sup>Green, "Jeremiah," p. 94.

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the true prophetic function cf. Jeremiah 23:16ff.

<sup>7</sup>The presence of God (cf. Ex. 3:11-15; Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23; 28:20).

<sup>8</sup>Jeremiah and Paul were convinced that celibacy was a part of their witness to their people (cf. 1 Cor. 7:26). Other prophets married and had children: cf. Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 8:1-4, 18; Ezekiel 24:15-27. Celibacy is not commanded as a biblical norm: the norm is to find the will of God for each life and then obey it.

<sup>9</sup>The form is from the verb *Ya'qob* and is related to the name Jacob.

<sup>10</sup>Note the opposite reaction on the part of the prophet Jonah and the results. Wisdom dictates obedience to the divine command!

<sup>11</sup>The "wheel" consisted of two circular stone discs connected by a vertical wooden rod, which was placed in a hole in the floor. The lower disc was larger and was activated by foot. The smaller upper disc was used to shape the clay.

<sup>12</sup>"Relent" (*naham*), translated "repent" in the KJV, is not the same word used for man's repentance (*shuv*). *Naham* does not reflect moral wrong on the part of God. It carries an emotional significance related to a change in a course of action: punishment "grieves" God; repentance by man "relieves" God of the necessity to punish and now He can do that which He most earnestly desires to do. The term is morally neutral.

<sup>13</sup>The text characterizes three types of religious leaders using technical terms related to their function: the "priests" were specialists in the Law (Torah) and seemingly dealt with matters of the cult—the distinction between the clean and unclean, i.e., the holy and the profane; the "prophets" dealt with the "Word"—the ethical and revelatory process; the "sages," or "wise men," dealt with sapiential counsel—the way of the good-practical life.

<sup>14</sup>Green, "Jeremiah," pp. 107-08.

## Home Study Exercise

**Basic activity** (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. List three observations made by Honeycutt about the strange command not to pray for the people.

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2. List four elements found in Jeremiah's prayer (14:19-22, one in each verse).

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3. At the time of his ministry (15:15-18), what was Jeremiah's basic problem?

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4. Read Jeremiah 15:19-21. What two things did God admonish Jeremiah to do (or not to do)?

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5. What was the significance of Jeremiah's celibacy?

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6. In what way is Chapter 18 pivotal in the book?

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7. Indicate the lesson learned at the potter's house.

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8. Explain the lesson of breaking the expensive jar (water decanter).

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9. Summarize Jeremiah's last bitter complaint (20:7-18).

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10. Summarize the evident reasons for Jeremiah's sense of failure.

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**Supplementary activity** (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read the indicated material and answer the following:

1. From Hebrew psychology, discuss how the word "heart" differs from present-day usage. (See "Heart" in a Bible encyclopedia or dictionary; read Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 142-145.)
2. Summarize the opposition Jeremiah faced. Include the sources. Describe his reaction. How can you possibly explain his imprecations?
3. What is the difference in usage of love (*'ahab*) and love (*hesed*)? (For questions 3—8 read H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*, pp. 62-69; see a Bible encyclopedia or dictionary on the love of God.)
4. When does the Old Testament state that God expressed His love (covenant) for Israel? What type of love was this?
5. Why is it also necessary to see love as judgement?
6. What is the foundation for man's well being?
7. In prophetic thought, what is the relationship between God's love and justice?
8. How does God's election relate to His love?

**Advanced activity** (*Level 3*). Read Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pages 443-483 and answer the following:

1. From the more primitive concept, how did man seek purification?
2. How did the concept of atonement acquire a personal quality?
3. What is the value of intercessory prayer for others?

4. What is the ultimate goal of salvation?
5. How did a law-oriented piety view forgiveness?
6. How is forgiveness related to the triumph of God's love?

### **Optional Supplementary Reading**

H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, pages 1-42.

## **Seminar Discussion**

Read, if possible, John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, pages 201-230. Discuss the following concerning the inner life and struggles of Jeremiah:

1. Why has Jeremiah been called "the weeping prophet"?
2. Identify the "Confessions of Jeremiah."
3. Would the confessions be best considered as a "Gethsemane" or "Calvary" experience?
4. How much did Jeremiah's sense of failure over the rejection of his message influence his despondency? (See texts such as 17:15; 20:8.)
5. How did a sense of inadequacy or self-examination possibly contribute to Jeremiah's discouragement?
6. Analyze the prayers of Jeremiah as revelations of his inner struggles.
7. As ideally constituted, what were the functions of the king? the priest? the prophet?
8. How does Jeremiah embody a transition from the classic prophet to the Psalmist? (Cf. such areas as his individual personal religion, prayer and communion.)
9. How did his personal experience contribute to a theology of survival for condemned Israel? (Cf. such areas as his individual salvation, new Israel, and personal righteousness.)
10. How did his struggle contribute to his understanding of prayer?
11. What similarities can you see in the lives of Jeremiah and Jesus?
12. What differences can you see in the lives of Jeremiah and Jesus?