

Jeremiah & Lamentations

JEREMIAH

Context

The historical context of Jeremiah is both complex and easy at the same time. I'll give you just the big picture here. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, fell in 722 to the Assyrians. The Assyrians have since been conquered by the Babylonians. Now the Babylonians are threatening the Southern Kingdom, Judah. That's where we are when the book opens. As the book progresses, Judah is invaded. By the time the book closes the people of Judah have been led away in three waves of exile, and the city of Jerusalem, together with Solomon's great temple (Do you remember that from 1 Kings?) Have been destroyed. In 605 BC the Babylonians took a large group of exiles off to Babylon, then they did it again in 597 BC, one last time in 586 BC when they razed the city and the temple to the ground. You can read about all of this in 2 Kings 22-25 and 2 Chronicles 34-36.¹ Jeremiah himself lived and prophesied through all of this.

But that is just the international scene. There is also a historical situation inside of Judah itself to be considered. The covenant people have been involved in idolatry for decades. They've been worshiping every strange deity from Baal to Molech to "the queen of heaven," and engaging in such acts of "worship" as temple prostitution and child sacrifice. That, on top of open dishonesty, corruption, injustice, adultery, oppression of the helpless slander and so on. They'd been sent prophets for a long time, but they would not repent.

All of that really leads me to the main issue at hand. The redemptive-historical context revolves almost exclusively around the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Judah. All of this sin is the fall out of Judah's violation of that covenant. All this political upheaval is the consequences of that disobedience. That is the redemptive-historical tension in the book. The people have made shipwreck of the covenant. Now Jeremiah is announcing the covenant curses that were written into the covenant from day one. See Deuteronomy 27 and 28. They are thrown off from Yahweh. What's going to happen next? Jeremiah prophesies this destruction, as well as Yahweh's new way forward to complete His plan of redemption.

Theme

Now Jeremiah is a big book, and no short theme statement can really do justice to the whole thing, but nonetheless let me try to encapsulate the theological center of the book that much of everything else is driving towards:

The old covenant has failed; not because it itself was defunct, but because the people were not able to keep it due to their sinful hearts. Therefore a new covenant is needed which will involve new hearts for the people of God.

¹ The teacher may at this time also want to recommend three reference books that any serious student of the Old Testament should have in their personal library. *The New Bible Dictionary* edited by Marshall, Millard, Packer, and Wiseman (published by IVP), *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* edited by Alexander, Rosner, Carson, and Goldsworthy (also published by IVP), and *An Introduction to the Old Testament* by Dillard and Longman (Zondervan). I suppose while we're at it, we can add *The Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps & Time Lines* [sic] (by Rose Publishing) to this list. These are great reference books for these sorts of historical and biblical-theological issues.

If you're familiar with Jeremiah, it may sound to you like I've just made a bee line for chapter 31. Not so however, Chapter 31 is really the theological mountain top that the rest of the book is climbing to and descending from. Let me explain. You'll see in that sentence a basic focus on two things: the covenant and the hearts of the people. The question that Jeremiah sets out to answer is yes, Why is the covenant be broke? The conclusion he comes to very early in his book is that the broken covenant is not the covenant's fault. In other words, there is nothing wrong with the covenant itself. Rather, the problem lies with the people. They *have not been able* to keep it. I'll repeat that: they are *unable*. They cannot keep the covenant, and it's because they're hearts are too in love with their sins. If it's their hearts that are the problem, they are also *unable* to change their own hearts. So for the first 28 chapters Jeremiah is *very* pessimistic. It looks hopeless. They *cannot* keep the covenant because they have these depraved hearts, and they *cannot* change their hearts. The *only* possible solution is if Yahweh sovereignly changes their hearts and makes them fit, from the inside out, to participate again in the covenant. After 28 depressing chapters, that is where Jeremiah ends up. As I said it's a big book, and it's easy to get lost in all the poetry and historical narratives. But if you can see that this is the overall message, set in the specific redemptive-historical context I just mentioned, then you'll be able to make sense of the individual part of the book.

Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Jeremiah 1-45 — Yahweh and His people
 - A. Ch. 1-29 — The proclamation against Judah (with hope at the end in Chapter 29)
 - B. Ch. 30-33 — The promise of a New Covenant (theological core of the book)
 - C. Ch. 34-45 — The final destruction of Jerusalem
- II. Jeremiah 46-52 — Yahweh and the Nations

Theme Texts

Let us now dive into Jeremiah at a few various points to see where this theme statement comes from.

Jeremiah 11:1-7

Of course, it's impossible to look at the entire book today. But much of the point of the book is rehearsed from **chapter 11**, so let's turn there.² In this chapter Yahweh lays the covenant out before the people. That is verses 1-6. Then Yahweh says that they've broken it in two specific ways: by not listening to Yahweh (that's in verses 6-8), and by turning to other gods (that's in verses 9-10). Finally Yahweh pronounces His judgment against the people. That's in verses 11-17. That is really good microcosm of the first 28 chapters of Jeremiah. As we go through this chapter let me point out some of Jeremiah's other major teachings that make an appearance in this text.

Let's read **verses 1-5**. That should all sound familiar. There is not much new there. It's all taken right out of Exodus and Deuteronomy.

It's in **verses 6-8** that things really cut loose. The first thing I want to point out here is that for hundreds of years **Yahweh has sent prophet after prophet** to them, again and again, to try and bring them back to obedience to the covenant. Did you see that there in verse 7? Then in verse 8, Yahweh accuses them of having not listened to these repeated attempts to reach

² The same type of study could be done on chapter 7 too (perhaps more thoroughly), but because 11:1-17 is shorter, we'll do it there.

them. That is a constant theme in Jeremiah: Yahweh reaching out by sending His word, and the people refusing to listen. In **chapter 7, verse 13**. “*And now, because you have done all these works,*” says the Lord, “*and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer,*” Jeremiah says the same things about his own ministry in **chapter 25, verses 3-4**, “*From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the Lord has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened. 4 And the Lord has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear.*”³

Instead, they’ve listened to the untruths and lying words of **false prophets**. Jeremiah is big on exposing them. Through the prophets, Yahweh says this in **6:14**: “*They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, Saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ When there is no peace.*” You see they just tell the people what they want to hear, instead of the truth that they need to hear. I wonder how many preachers in America today might be guilty of the same thing. Well, such preaching is worthless. In **chapter 7, verse 8** Jeremiah says, “*Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit.*” Again, I wonder how far removed much of America evangelicalism is from such things. In many churches the word of God is not preached. It’s substituted for empty words designed to scratch itching ears. In turn, therefore, many Christians don’t grow, and churches are not built up with genuine, gospel believing, Christ loving, Holy Spirit filled, Bible saturated disciples of the Lord.

But we dare not lose our focus here. Let’s go back to Jeremiah 11. Did you notice also that in verse 8, it says everyone followed their own evil **hearts**. The issue of the heart is such a major theme, that’s I’m going to give it its own treatment here in a minute. I just point that out to you in passing right now.

Let’s move on to **11:9-13**. There are a couple of things to point out here as well. By listening to the fast prophets and their own evil hearts, they’ve turned to other gods. Therefore, it says in verse 11 that **disaster** is coming upon them. Of course the wrath of Yahweh because of idolatry is a major theme throughout the book. It may be asked why idolatry, the simple worship of false gods, is such a major ordeal to Yahweh. Well, Jeremiah tells us. Turn back to **chapter 5**, and let’s start reading in **verse 7**. Two things I want you to notice there. First, even though these gods are not real, the true worship of them has resulted in other greatly immoral acts. Turning one’s back on the true God is to abandon the only true moral criteria there is, and so will *necessarily* result in other unethical behaviors. Secondly, did you notice in verse 9 that Yahweh says He must avenge *Himself*? In verse 12, did you notice that Yahweh says that they are *lying about Him*? What this means, in other words, is that Yahweh’s name and glory are being defamed. He is being made to look unworthy of fidelity and dishonorable *through* His people. Now that is a great evil. Of course Yahweh will uphold His glory. How can He *not* judge sinners who brought down, and trampled underfoot, that which is of most glory and majesty and splendor in the entire universe: The name, fame, and glory of Yahweh! So the people are here judged.

Back in chapter 11 now, isn’t it interesting that in verse 11 Yahweh says also that He will **not listen** to them when they call upon Him. If people won’t listen to *Him*, neither will *He* listen to *them*!

³ In looking at all of these themes, the number of cross references in Jeremiah could be multiplied greatly. But just a few will have to do for this introduction.

Another point is made in **verse 12**. When calamity comes, these gods that the people have been trusting in will **not be able to save**. That is another major part of Jeremiah's theology: these false gods can do nothing for you. They cannot save. They are profitless. Even more so, these idols cannot only not save, but they actually positively can steal your life away from you! Strange thing! Even though they aren't real, they do have the ability to kill! Listen to **Jeremiah 4:30**: "*And when you are plundered, What will you do? Though you clothe yourself with crimson, Though you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, Though you enlarge your eyes with paint, In vain you will make yourself fair; Your lovers will despise you; They will seek your life*" This doctrine that idolatry kills is actually not exclusive to Jeremiah. It's all over the Old Testament.⁴ That which one sets his heart on, he will be conformed into the image of that thing. If you set your heart on worthless things, you will become worthless yourself (Jeremiah 2:5). The same principal, however, applies when one sets their heart on Yahweh, the holy one of Israel. He is transformed from one degree of glory to another (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18). This should give us a lot to think about in regard to what we have *really* set our hearts on.

One last point from Jeremiah 11: Look at **verse 17**. It is repeated over and over in Jeremiah that this calamity they are experiencing is Brought by Yahweh, but is not Yahweh's fault. It is the fault of the covenant breakers, the people (cf. 2:17-19; 4:18)

Jeremiah 27:5-7

And as mentioned earlier, this calamity comes in the form of the Babylonians. Turn to **chapter 27, verses 5-7**. Wow! If there was any doubt about Yahweh's complete sovereignty over His universe, it doesn't come from the Bible! At any rate, you can read about Jerusalem's fall, which is here foretold, in chapter 39. So far our examination of Jeremiah has't given us anything to really be encouraged about. It's only going to get worse before it gets better. But let's pause here to address any questions.

Total Depravity

I want to look now at why this happened. Yes, this disaster is the result of the broken covenant. But I want to ask a deeper question. *Why was the covenant broke? Why couldn't the people keep it? It is now that we"* return to think about the people's hearts.

Turn to **chapter 6, verse 10**. They *cannot* hear the word of Yahweh because they have no desire to.

Why is this lack of both ability and desire? Well, **17:1** helps us out here. Whoa! Sin is carved, etched, onto the heart! Look at **verse 9**. Have you ever heard people give the advice to "follow your heart?" Apparently they haven't read Jeremiah. What we are seeing here is that the heart is greatly limited in capacity and feeling because sin has taken up such a seat there.

Let's not see what the effect of such crippling sin is. Turn to **18:12** Now the people are *led* by these evil hearts. They obey them. I could multiply the number of verses in Jeremiah that emphasize this that would make your head spin! Sin *drives and controls* the person. Carved onto ones heart is binds, limits, and controls. You thought "Total Depravity" was Paul's big teaching. It's right here in Jeremiah in full force.

One last thing on this issue: Turn to **13:23** Not only does the entrenched sin of a man's heart cripple, limit, and control him. , but it also won't release Him. A man cannot change his

⁴ Psalm 115:3-8; Isaiah 1:29-31; 44:9-20; Habakkuk 2:18-19; Jeremiah 2:5

own heart anymore than a leopard can change his spot. Can a leopard change his spots? Either can a man change his heart. As we just read in 17:9, the heart is beyond cure.

To recap this little survey, Jeremiah is saying that the human heart is rendered incapable of hearing God's word, restricted in its desires, emotions, and feelings because sin is carved onto it. Now that sin has become a slave master, driving and controlling the man. There is no way for the human, to change his own heart by his own effort. This is simply damning!

Can I show you on other thing to demonstrate just how bad this is? Turn to **44:15**. Do you remember that I told you that the destruction of Jerusalem was told in chapter 39? Well, that means that the context for chapter 44 is *after* that destruction, and some of the people have escaped to Egypt with Jeremiah. Isn't that amazing? Everything Jeremiah has said has come to pass. Yet, they *still* won't listen to him and turn back to Yahweh, the only true God.

Sin has simply rendered the human heart dead to God, that neither warning (like from Jeremiah), disaster (from Yahweh), logic (like here in chapter 44 after the disaster), nor one's own will power (any more than a leopard and his spots) can turn it back to God.

Jeremiah 29

The first 28 chapters of Jeremiah really don't have *any* hope in them at all. There are a few calls to repent, but Jeremiah already knows that the people don't listen. So it is really 28 chapters of utter pessimism and despair. But then **chapter 29** contains a letter that Jeremiah has written to the people going off into exile.⁵ Let's read part of it. Look at **verse 10**. Now that's odd! Why has Yahweh's posture towards them suddenly changed? What makes Yahweh think that, as it says in **verse 12**, they will call upon Him? They've been ignoring Him for so long, even after the destruction of the city as we just read in chapter 44. What makes Yahweh think that, as we just read in **verse 13**, that they will seek Him with all their hearts? The same hearts we just read about? It's not very likely.

Jeremiah 31:31-37

Well, the answers to these questions, and the solution to all the problems in the first 28 chapters, come in **chapter 31**. Let's read **verses 31-34**. This passage sits in the context of Jeremiah like an unexpected hero that comes out of nowhere. It, at once, solves all of the covenant people's real problems and glorifies Yahweh *immensely*. Let's look at a number of things. First notice that in **verse 31** Yahweh is promising a *new* covenant here. In **verse 32** Yahweh says what this new covenant will *not* be like. It won't be like the first one. But notice that the problem with the first covenant was not Yahweh, nor the covenant itself. What was the problem, according to **verse 32**, with the old Mosaic covenant? Yeah, the problem was that *the people* broke it. The problem with the first covenant lay with *the people*. That comes really as no surprise after all that we just read. The solution to all we just read, and what this new covenant *will* be like is magnificent. Look at **verse 33**. If you were to sit down and read Jeremiah all the way through, from start to finish, in one sitting, that verse right there will make you leap out of your seat and scream. Yes! Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! To Him be the glory forever and ever, amen! In one stroke of genius, Yahweh preserves His plan of redemption and holds out this massive hope for the future. The solution to all the covenant people's problems is to give them *new hearts! New minds!* If the heart is wickedly deceitful above all things, and beyond cure, if not one can fix their own heart,

⁵ This letter is believed to have been written in 597 B.C. after the second deportation

the only way the heart is going to be healed is if Yahweh sovereignly and *miraculously* intervenes, removes the heart of stone, and replaces it with a heart of flesh.

Do you remember Jeremiah 17:1, where he said that sin is carved onto the people's hearts? Well now, Yahweh's good and perfect and holy law will be carved onto their hearts. Do you remember also how that sin directed the people's lives? Well now, they will be led by the law of God. You see, under the old covenant the law was *external*. It was something that sinners needed to measure up to. But they don't have the ability, let alone the nature desire to do so. What makes the new covenant so superior to the old covenant is that now the law is *within* the people of God. It is no longer this towering task master that looms threatening over incapable and stiff-necked people. Rather, now it's part of people. It shapes and comprises their desires, wills, wants, loves, etc. It is something they delight in doing! Like rivers *delight* to flow to the sea, and can't run there, so Yahweh's people with these new hearts are swift to hasten to obey the law of Yahweh. Indeed they love it. Look at **32:40**. Yahweh now equips His people with hearts fit for never turning back from Him!

Have you been given such a heart? Is what I've just described representative of your feelings and desires? In other words, is the law of Yahweh burdensome to you? Are you resentful towards it? Or is it the very air you breathe to do the will of God? If it is not, let me tell you one other thing that makes the new covenant superior to the old. Look at **verse 34 in chapter 31** again. Did you hear at the end the promise of forgiveness of sins? Turn to the book of **Hebrews** in the New Testament. We are told this second reason why the new covenant is superior to the old. Under the old covenant animal sacrifices were made day in and day out. But they could *never* take away sins. They could only point forward to a sacrifice in the future that *would* take away sins. Turn to **chapter 9**. Look at **verse 11**. Follow the covenantal reasoning here. Did you hear that? Christ's death was a ransom, a buying back of slavery! That's what a ransom is. But slavery to what? Well, Jeremiah has already told us. Slavery to sin! Hebrews 9:15 tells us the same thing. Through Christ's death and resurrection we are "ransomed and set free from *sins!*"⁶

So Christ sets us free from one evil and tyrannical lordship, that of sin, and brings us to inherit these new hearts, so that we can, as it says in verse 14, "serve the living God!" Now *that* is good news! *That* is gospel! Those of us who have turned from their sin and trusted in Christ in this way do so only because, as we read in Jeremiah, Yahweh has given us new hearts. He has given us hearts and minds to love Him with, eyes to see and ears to hear the truth, wills and desires that are no longer enslaved to sin but set free to pursue the delight in beholding the majesty of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. No wonder we worship Him! Had He not give us Christ, and given us new hearts, we'd all still be stuck in the first 28 chapters of Jeremiah. As we read in **Colossians 2:13-14**, "*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all*

⁶ Jeremiah 33:17-26 is also worthy of attention here and what it says about Christ, but for time's sake we have to pass over it. However, the idea of "David, the servant of Yahweh" appears in Ezekiel too, so we'll pick it up there.

trespasses, 14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”⁷

So I ask you again. Have you this new heart? In New Testament terms, have you been born again? Christianity is not a decision you make. It is no will power religion. It is not mere intellectual ascent to things that happened one weekend outside of Jerusalem two thousand years ago. It is a regeneration of spirituality dead human beings into a lively and dynamic relationship with the Holy One of the universe. Is that what you experience? If not, cry out to God. Plead with Him to give you this new heart. Search Him while He may be found. Stare with an intense gaze into the gospel of Jesus Christ, because it is *there* that the glory of God powerfully shines forth, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, rescue people out of darkness, redeem them from sin, and give the new birth.⁸

Jeremiah 34-45

Let's close Jeremiah out here. Chapters 34-45 are about the last days of Jerusalem, just before and during its destruction in 586 BC.

Jeremiah 46-52

Then chapters 46-52 are Jeremiah's prophecies of judgment against other nations, including Babylon (cf. ch. 51)!

LAMENTATIONS

Context

Lamentations is also written by Jeremiah. It is set right after Yahweh has destroyed His own city, Jerusalem. In this long poem Jerusalem is personified as a woman mourning for her lost children and has no one to comfort her.

Theme

⁷ **Ephesians 2:1-10** is also a powerful affirmation of the same things. *“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”*

⁸ Much of this language is taken from 2 Corinthians 4:3-6. John Piper has written an excellent book on these verses called *God is the Gospel*.

The message to those left behind after the destruction of the city is this:

We are in mourning because Yahweh has done this, even though it's our fault. Now we need Him to change our hearts, for He will again comfort us.

Yes, I said that the focus of the book is that *Yahweh* has destroyed His city. Jeremiah makes that very clear in this book. This is another one of the books that is strong on the sovereignty of God. Nonetheless, it's the people's own fault that this has happened. Yet, as with every prophet, there is hope. Just like his major work, Jeremiah says that hope is held out in the prospect of receiving new hearts from Yahweh.

Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Lamentations 1-2 — An Acrostic* According to the Hebrew Alphabet
- II. Lamentations 3-4 — An Acrostic at a Quicker, Acrostic Pace
- III. Lamentations 5 — A Fractionalized, Still Quicker, Acrostic

* An "acrostic" is a poem where each successive line begins with the next letter in the alphabet⁹

Theme texts

Lamentations 3:37-40

These twin doctrines of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility can often be a real stumbling block for some. People often wonder how the two can really coexist, and so they sacrifice one for the other. But these doctrines were really *no* problem at all for Jeremiah. These themes of Yahweh's sovereignty and the people's own responsibility are easy to see all over Lamentations. They are virtually everywhere. In our remaining moments let's just look at one passage, **3:37-40**. Notice how the first two verses strongly affirm Yahweh's complete sovereignty and then the very next two human accountability. There is no apologetic for it. It's just affirmed, and accepted as though Jeremiah is saying "Of course this is the case!" Yahweh is sovereign and we should turn to Him.

Lamentations 5:21

But just like his other book, Jeremiah here again affirms that we need Yahweh, again in His sovereignty, to give us new hearts in order to make that turning to Him possible. Look at **5:21**. Do you see there the prayer that Yahweh take the initiative to turn us to Himself, so *that we can* turn to Him?¹⁰

Lamentations 3:31-33

⁹ Strictly speaking an acrostic could also form a word or a phrase out of the first letters of the poetic lines. Whenever, they appear in the Old Testament they are constructed according to the Hebrew Alphabet

¹⁰ It may also be worthwhile pointing out that God's sovereignty in changing our hearts does not make us inert or lazy, but all the more active (cf. Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:13; 1 Peter 4:10f).

So this book also holds out hope that all is not lost. If you flip back to **chapter 3**, look at **verse 31**. Verse 33 literally reads that Yahweh does not bring affliction or grief “from His heart,” meaning that He would much rather pour out that compassion and unfailing love. In fact, that is exactly what those who are in Christ have known, and will *always* know *forever* days without end.

Some application that I would make here is this: Even though I’ve said many times in this class that calamity is not always necessarily directly related to someone’s sins, sometimes it *is*. When the Lord chastens us, we should examine our lives (cf. Proverbs 3:11f; Hebrews 12:5-13). But at the same time, as Christians, we should remember that the Lord’s chastening is always an act of love on His behalf. He chastens to discipline us, and is eager to comfort again.

Conclusion

A powerful message from a powerful prophet. Jeremiah is serious about sin, and pessimistic about the human heart. But he is also very serious about the fulfillment of Yahweh’s covenantal plan, and optimistic about Christ’s regenerating power.