

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: No Balm in Gilead; the Weeping Prophet

Jeremiah 8:4–10:25

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, these chapters establish the nature of sin as persistent, willful refusal to return to God, and they unveil the grief of a holy God over that sin. The teacher must show that God's judgment is never cold or arbitrary; it flows from a heart that grieves, pleads, and offers healing. The "balm in Gilead" (8:22) makes the tragedy plain: the cure exists, but it is refused. This points forward to the Lord Jesus, who is the true Healer of the soul (Isaiah 53:5; Luke 19:41–44), and it warns against the false prophets who cry "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (8:11), papering over sin instead of dealing with it.

The passage also sets out where true glory and security are found. Against boasting in wisdom, might, and riches, God says the one worthy boast is to "understand and know me" (9:23–24). And against the lifeless, hand-made idols of the nations, Jeremiah magnifies the living God, the Maker of heaven and earth, "the true God... the living God and the everlasting King" (10:10). The teacher should let this exalt God in the students' hearts: the folly of idolatry, ancient and modern, is exposed by the sheer majesty of the One who made all things. Keep the focus on the uniqueness, sovereignty, and steadfast love of the one true God.

Beyond the doctrine, the lesson aims at the formation of the student in two directions. First, toward a tender heart that grieves over sin (its own and others') the way God and Jeremiah grieved, rather than a heart that is hardened, indifferent, or merely annoyed. Second, toward a life whose boast and security rest not in competence, strength, or possessions, but in knowing the Lord. The teacher's goal is that students walk out softened toward sin, sobered by the closing harvest, and anchored in the one worthy boast of knowing God in Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 8:4–7. God asks why His people, unlike a man who rises after falling or birds that keep their seasons, "turn away in perpetual backsliding" and refuse to return. What does this reveal about the nature of sin as a refusal to repent, and about how unnatural and tragic persistent impenitence really is?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the sheer reasonableness of God's question in verses 4–5. "When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return?" God appeals to ordinary experience: a

man who stumbles gets up, a traveler who takes a wrong turn comes back. Returning is the most natural response to a wrong turn. So why will this people not return?

The phrase to underline is “perpetual backsliding” and “they refuse to return” (8:5). Sin, at its heart, is not merely a wrong act but a refusal to turn back. The tragedy of Judah is not that they sinned once but that they would not repent. Help the class see that impenitence, not just transgression, is what God marvels at here.

Verse 7 lands the rebuke with a haunting image: “Even the stork in the heavens knows her times... but my people know not the rules of the Lord.” The migrating birds keep their God-given appointments by instinct; God’s own covenant people will not keep theirs by choice. Creation obeys; the crown of creation rebels.

Apply it honestly. Repentance is meant to be as natural as getting back up after a fall. When we refuse to return, we are acting against our own design, against creation’s own rhythm. The call here is not to despair but to do the most natural and freeing thing of all: turn back.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin as refusal to repent, not merely a single wrong act (8:5).
- The unnaturalness and tragedy of “perpetual backsliding.”
- Creation obeys God’s rhythms while His people rebel (8:7).
- Repentance is meant to be as natural as rising after a fall.
- Impenitence, not just transgression, is what God marvels at.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God present returning as the most natural thing in the world?
- What is the difference between stumbling and refusing to get back up?
- How does the obedience of the migrating birds rebuke our reluctance to turn?

Question 2

Student Question:

God observed that even migrating birds “know their times,” yet His people “know not the rules of the Lord” (8:7). What is one area where you sense God’s clear direction yet have been slow to turn and follow it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question takes the image of the birds that “know their times” (8:7) and turns it on us. The birds need no sermon to keep their appointments with God’s seasons; they simply respond. The question gently exposes the places where we know God’s direction yet drag our feet.

Help students get concrete. God's direction is rarely mysterious in the area where we are slow to obey; usually we know exactly what He is asking. A relationship to mend, a habit to break, a step of generosity, a word of witness, a discipline to begin. The issue is not knowledge but will.

Invite honest naming. Ask each person to finish privately: "The clear thing I have been slow to turn and do is..." Like Judah, our problem is rarely that we do not know; it is that we will not turn.

Encourage them with the naturalness of repentance from the previous question. Turning is not a heavy burden God lays on us; it is the freeing return home that we were made for. The birds make it look easy because it is meant to be.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between knowing God's direction and turning to follow it.
- Our problem is usually will, not knowledge (8:7).
- Concrete obedience: the specific thing we have been slow to do.
- Repentance as a freeing return, not a heavy burden.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you sense God's clear direction yet keep delaying?
- Why is our reluctance usually about will rather than knowledge?
- What would it look like to turn and follow in that area this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 8:11 and 8:20–22. The leaders healed the wound "lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace," and the people lament, "The harvest is past... and we are not saved," while a balm in Gilead goes unused. What does this teach about the danger of false comfort and the tragedy of a real cure refused?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 11 names a deadly form of malpractice: the leaders "have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." They treated a fatal disease with reassuring words. False comfort is not kindness; it is spiritual malpractice that leaves the patient to die comforted.

Set this against the people's own lament in verse 20: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." The season of opportunity has closed, and the false "peace" did nothing to actually heal them. The teacher should let the weight of that closing harvest settle: there are windows that close.

Then comes verse 22, the heart of the chapter: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Gilead was famous for its healing balm; the cure existed and was within reach. The tragedy is not an absent remedy but a refused one. The wound was treatable. The patient would not be treated.

Apply both edges. Beware those who cry “Peace, peace” over real sin, in the world and in our own hearts; and beware refusing the cure that is offered. The true balm is finally found in Christ, “with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). The healing exists. The only question is whether we will receive it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- False comfort as spiritual malpractice: “Peace, peace, when there is no peace” (8:11).
- The closing of a season of opportunity: “the harvest is past” (8:20).
- The tragedy of a real cure refused, not a cure that is absent (8:22).
- The true balm fulfilled in Christ: “with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).
- The danger of being comforted in our sin rather than healed of it.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is false comfort more dangerous than honest bad news?
- What does it mean that the balm existed but went unused?
- Where do we hear “peace, peace” spoken over things that are not at peace with God?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jeremiah grieved that a season of opportunity had closed: “The harvest is past... and we are not saved” (8:20). Where in your life is there a window of opportunity to deal with God that you do not want to let slip past unaddressed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses the closing harvest of verse 20 into the student’s present. “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” Some windows of opportunity do not stay open forever, and the saddest words are spoken at a door that has quietly shut.

Help students name a real window. A conversation with God they keep postponing, a sin they intend to deal with “later,” a reconciliation they keep delaying, a step of obedience they assume they can always take tomorrow. Today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2); we are never promised the window stays open.

Guard against fear-driven panic, but do press the urgency. The point is not anxiety but a holy seriousness about not letting the season slip. God’s patience is real, but it is not an invitation to delay.

Move toward one step taken now rather than later. What is the matter with God you have been treating as if you can always get to it eventually? Deal with it while the harvest is still here.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Windows of opportunity that do not stay open forever (8:20).
- “Now is the day of salvation”: the danger of postponing dealings with God (2 Corinthians 6:2).
- Holy urgency without fear-driven panic.
- Acting on conviction now rather than assuming a later chance.

Discussion Prompts

- What matter with God have you been postponing as if there is always more time?
- Why is “I’ll deal with it later” such a dangerous spiritual habit?
- What is one step you could take today rather than someday?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 9:1–6. Jeremiah longs for tears to weep over a people given to deceit, where “they bend their tongue like a bow” and “no one speaks the truth.” What does the prophet’s grief reveal about how God Himself feels toward sin, and about the kind of heart God’s servants are called to have?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 9 opens the prophet’s heart wide: “Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night” (9:1). This is no detached preacher pronouncing doom; this is a man broken over his people. Jeremiah is rightly called the weeping prophet, and these tears are the doorway into the heart of God.

The reasons for the tears are spelled out in verses 2–6: a society given to deceit, where “they bend their tongue like a bow,” where “no one speaks the truth,” where treachery has corroded every relationship. Sin is not abstract here; it has poisoned the way neighbors speak to one another. Jeremiah grieves both the offense to God and the wreckage among people.

Teach that Jeremiah’s grief mirrors God’s own. The Lord is not indifferent to sin, nor is He merely angry; He grieves. This is the same heart that would one day weep over Jerusalem in the person of the Lord Jesus (Luke 19:41–44). God’s servants are called to share that heart, to feel sin’s tragedy and not merely to denounce it.

Apply it to the formation of the student. It is possible to be doctrinally correct about sin while being emotionally cold toward sinners. Jeremiah shows a better way: holiness that weeps. The call is to let our hearts be broken by what breaks the heart of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jeremiah as the weeping prophet: grief, not detachment, over sin (9:1).
- Sin's corrosion of truth and trust between neighbors (9:2-6).
- Jeremiah's tears mirror the grieving heart of God Himself.
- The Lord Jesus weeping over Jerusalem fulfills this pattern (Luke 19:41-44).
- The call to holiness that weeps rather than merely denounces.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God grieves over sin rather than being merely angry?
- How does Jeremiah's weeping reveal the heart we are called to have?
- Why is it possible to be right about sin yet cold toward sinners?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jeremiah's tears flowed from love, not mere disapproval. How can you tell the difference in your own heart between grieving over someone's sin out of love and simply being annoyed or scandalized by it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question draws the line between Jeremiah's tears and our own reactions. Jeremiah's grief came from love; he wept over people he longed to see healed. Much of our reaction to others' sin, by contrast, is closer to annoyance, scandal, or self-righteous distaste.

Help students test their hearts. Grief that comes from love wants the person restored and prays for them; reactions that come from pride want the person exposed and talk about them. One moves us toward intercession; the other toward gossip or contempt. The difference reveals what is really in us.

Name the temptation honestly. It is easy to be scandalized by sins we are not tempted by, and easy to be dismissive of people whose failures embarrass us. That is not Jeremiah's grief; it is a counterfeit of it.

Move toward intercession. The personal-reflection question already invited students to carry someone before God in prayer. Press it further: who is a person whose sin tempts you to contempt, and how could you begin to grieve and pray for them as Jeremiah did?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between grieving sin from love and being merely annoyed or scandalized.
- Love moves toward intercession; pride moves toward gossip and contempt.
- The ease of being scandalized by sins we are not tempted by.

- Turning our reaction to others' sin into prayer for them.

Discussion Prompts

- How can you tell whether you are grieving someone's sin or merely judging it?
- Whose sin tempts you toward contempt rather than compassion?
- What would it look like to begin praying for that person as Jeremiah wept for his?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 9:23–24. God says no one should boast in wisdom, might, or riches, but only in this: “that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness.” What does this reveal about where true glory and security are found, and about the God we are invited to know?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 23–24 are a clearing of pure light in the middle of these dark chapters. God names the three things humanity most loves to boast in (wisdom, might, riches) and forbids them all as the ground of our glory. These are the classic securities of every age: be smart enough, strong enough, rich enough, and you will be safe.

Then God names the one worthy boast: “but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.” The highest privilege a human being can have is not to be wise, powerful, or wealthy, but to know God. And notice what God reveals of Himself: He is “the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.” To know Him is to know One who is both perfectly righteous and full of covenant love.

Teach this as the antidote to the idolatry the next chapter will expose. We will always boast in something; the question is whether it is a thing that can save us. Wisdom, might, and riches all fail at the grave. Knowing God is the one treasure that holds. Paul echoes it: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (2 Corinthians 10:17).

Apply it warmly. God is not merely forbidding pride; He is offering us the greatest possible joy, to know and be known by Him. In Christ this knowing reaches its fullness, for to see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9). The one worthy boast is gloriously available.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The three false securities: wisdom, might, and riches (9:23).
- The one worthy boast: to understand and know God (9:24).
- God revealed as practicing steadfast love, justice, and righteousness.
- We always boast in something; only knowing God can finally save (2 Corinthians 10:17).
- Knowing God reaches its fullness in Christ (John 14:9).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God forbid boasting in wisdom, might, and riches?
- What does it mean that the highest human privilege is to know God?
- How does knowing God in Christ become our one worthy boast?

Question 8

Student Question:

We are all tempted to find our worth and security in our competence, our strength, or our resources (9:23). Which of these three is your favorite hiding place, and what would it look like to boast instead in knowing the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question makes the three false securities of verse 23 personal. We each have a favorite: the intellectual trusts in being smart and well-informed; the capable person trusts in strength and accomplishment; the comfortable person trusts in money and possessions. Each is a quiet idol that promises a security only God can give.

Help students identify their own. Ask which of the three they instinctively reach for when they feel threatened: their cleverness, their competence and control, or their financial cushion. The one we reach for in fear is usually the one we secretly boast in.

Expose the fragility of each. Wisdom can be outwitted, strength can fail, riches can vanish overnight (the rich fool of Luke 12:16–21 had all three and lost them in a night). None of them can carry us through death or stand before God.

Move toward the better boast. What would it look like this week to consciously rest your security in knowing the Lord rather than in your favorite hiding place? Naming the idol is the first step toward boasting in God instead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying our personal favorite among wisdom, might, and riches (9:23).
- The thing we reach for in fear reveals what we secretly trust.
- The fragility of every security but God (Luke 12:16–21).
- Consciously resting our security in knowing the Lord.

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the three (cleverness, strength, money) is your favorite hiding place?
- What do you instinctively reach for when you feel threatened?
- What would it look like to boast in knowing God instead this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 10:1–16. Jeremiah contrasts the lifeless idols that “cannot speak,” “cannot walk,” and “have to be carried” with the living God who “made the earth by his power,” the “true God... the living God and the everlasting King.” What does this sustained contrast reveal about the folly of idolatry, the uniqueness and majesty of the one true God, and why He alone is worthy of our trust and worship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest block of the lesson, a sustained and majestic contrast between dead idols and the living God (10:1–16). Jeremiah piles up the absurdities of idolatry: an idol is a tree cut down, shaped by a craftsman, fastened with hammer and nails “so that it cannot move” (10:4). Idols are “like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk” (10:5). The gods of the nations must be carried by their worshipers; they cannot carry anyone.

Against this folly Jeremiah sets the living God in soaring language: “There is none like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is great in might” (10:6). He is the Maker, not the made: “It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens” (10:12). And the climax in verse 10: “But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King.” Speaking, walking, creating, reigning, alive, eternal: He is everything the idols are not.

Teach the doctrine of God here with reverence. The uniqueness of the one true God is not one option among many; it is the bedrock of all true worship. Idols are the works of human hands (echoing 1:16); they are projections we make and then must prop up. The living God made us; we did not make Him. This is why He alone is worthy of trust and worship.

Press the modern application, for idolatry never died; it only changed clothes. Few of us carve wooden gods, but we still fashion securities with our own hands and then serve and prop them up: career, image, comfort, technology, money, even ministry. The test Jeremiah applies still works: can the thing you trust speak, act, save? Only the living God can. Everything else must be carried; He carries us (Isaiah 46:3–4).

Lead it in worship and trust. The point of exposing idols is not merely to mock them but to send the heart running to the living God who made the heavens. When the idols are unmasked as helpless, the soul is freed to rest its whole weight on the One who is alive, almighty, and everlasting, the God fully revealed at last in His Son.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The folly of idolatry: gods that are made, fastened down, and must be carried (10:3–5).

- The living God as Maker, not made: He created earth, world, and heavens (10:12).
- “The true God... the living God and the everlasting King” (10:10): He speaks, acts, reigns, and lives.
- The uniqueness of the one true God as the bedrock of all true worship.
- Modern idols: securities we fashion with our own hands and must prop up (career, image, comfort, money).
- The living God carries us; idols must be carried (Isaiah 46:3–4).
- Exposing idols frees the soul to rest its whole weight on God, fully revealed in Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the most absurd thing about idolatry as Jeremiah describes it?
- How does the contrast between Maker and made expose the folly of every idol?
- What modern ‘idols’ do we fashion and then have to prop up?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across these chapters of grief and glory, from the unused balm in Gilead to the one worthy boast of knowing the Lord. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using this passage to soften your heart toward sin and to root your boast in knowing Him.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question asks students to move from study to surrender. Look back across these chapters: the unused balm, the closing harvest, the prophet’s tears, the one worthy boast, and the living God towering over the dead idols. Two great themes call for response: a heart softened toward sin, and a boast rooted in knowing the Lord.

Resist letting this stay general. Press for one specific way the Lord Jesus is forming them: a hardness to surrender, a person to grieve over and pray for in love, a false security to release, a window of opportunity to seize, an idol to abandon for the living God.

Tie it explicitly to Christ. Jesus is the true balm in Gilead, the Healer the people refused. He wept over Jerusalem as Jeremiah wept over Judah. And in Him the one worthy boast becomes ours, for to know Christ is to know the Father (John 14:9; Philippians 3:8). We are formed not by trying to feel more, but by walking with the One whose heart breaks over sin and who alone can heal it.

Invite each person to name their “one thing” aloud or on paper and carry it into the week in prayer and obedience. The aim is a heart that grieves like God’s and a life whose whole boast is to know Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from knowledge to formation and obedience (James 1:22).
- Christ as the true balm in Gilead and the Healer the people refused (Isaiah 53:5).
- A heart softened toward sin and a boast rooted in knowing the Lord (Philippians 3:8).
- The value of naming one concrete step of change.

Discussion Prompts

- Which theme of these chapters is the Lord pressing on you most?
- What is the one specific way your heart needs to be softened toward sin?
- How does knowing Christ become the boast that reshapes your whole life?