

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Lesson 6: No Balm in Gilead; the Weeping Prophet -- Jeremiah 8:4–10:25

There is a kind of grief that only love can feel. You have felt it watching someone you love walk straight toward a cliff, refusing every warning, certain they know better. You would do anything to stop them, and you cannot, because they will not turn. That is the ache that runs through these chapters like a deep underground river. God grieves. His prophet grieves. And the strangest part is that the people, the ones actually walking toward the cliff, feel nothing at all.

God keeps asking the most reasonable question in the world. “When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return?” (8:4). Anybody who stumbles gets back up. Anybody who takes a wrong turn comes back. It is the most natural thing imaginable. So why, God asks, does this people turn away and refuse to return? Even the birds know better: “the stork in the heavens knows her times... but my people know not the rules of the Lord” (8:7). The migrating birds keep their appointments with God’s seasons. His own people will not keep theirs.

Then come the lines that have echoed through three thousand years of human sorrow. “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (8:20). The season of opportunity has closed, and nothing has changed. And the prophet cries out, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?” (8:22). Gilead was famous for its healing balm. The medicine existed. The wound was treatable. But the patient refused the cure. And so Jeremiah weeps: “Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night” (9:1).

Yet these chapters are not only tears. In the middle of the weeping, God plants a clearing of light. He tells His people where true glory is found: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom... but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me” (9:23–24). And He sets the dead, helpless idols of the nations against the living God who made the heavens, “the true God... the living God and the everlasting King” (10:10). There is one worthy boast in all the universe: to know Him. The weeping prophet is also the prophet who points us to the only Healer there is.

Group Discussion: God marveled that His people would not return when returning is the most natural thing in the world (8:4–5). Why do you think people (including believers) so often refuse to turn back even when they know they are headed the wrong way, and what makes returning to God so hard?

Personal Reflection: Jeremiah wept day and night over the sin and coming sorrow of his people (9:1). Whose spiritual condition stirs that kind of grief in you, and how might God be inviting you to carry that person before Him in prayer rather than in mere frustration?

Read Jeremiah 8:4–10:25

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Luke 19:41–44, where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem as Jeremiah wept over Judah; Ezekiel 13:10, false prophets who cry “Peace” when there is no peace; 2 Corinthians 10:17, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord”; Psalm 115:4–8, idols that have mouths but cannot speak; Isaiah 53:5, “with his stripes we are healed,” the true balm in Christ.

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