

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Lesson 8: The Ruined Loincloth and the Drought -- Jeremiah 13:1–15:21

God hands Jeremiah a strange piece of street theater. “Go and buy a linen loincloth and put it around your waist, but do not dip it in water.” So the prophet does it. He wears it, that close, intimate garment pressed against his own skin, the thing nearest the body, the thing no one else even sees. And then God says, “Take the loincloth... and go to the Euphrates and hide it there in a cleft of the rock.” Many days later, dig it up. And of course it is ruined, rotted, “good for nothing.” Then God explains the parable, and it lands like a blow: “For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me... that they might be for me a people... but they would not listen.”

Sit with that picture, because it is tender before it is terrible. God did not want His people at arm’s length. He wanted them close, as close as the garment a man wears against his skin. “That they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory.” That is the whole purpose of a covenant: nearness, belonging, glory shared. And what ruins a loincloth is not staying close. It is being buried far off by the Euphrates, in the dirt of Babylon, away from the One it was made to cling to. Pride and idolatry pulled Judah loose from God, and a thing made for glory rotted in the ground.

Then chapter 14 turns the soil dry. “Judah mourns, and her gates languish... the cry of Jerusalem goes up. Her nobles send their servants for water; they come to the cisterns; they find no water.” A drought has the land by the throat, and even the doe in the field abandons her newborn fawn because there is no grass. Jeremiah pleads, the people half-pray, and God says something that should stop our breath: “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people.” The two great intercessors of Israel could not move Him now. Sin, persisted in long enough, can harden a season past the point of pleading.

And yet the book will not let us leave without hope, because the chapters end not with the crowd but with the prophet, discouraged and raw. Jeremiah complains that he is a man of strife, that God has become to him “like a deceitful brook,” like waters that fail. He is bitter, honest, near to quitting. And God does not crush him. God restores him: “If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth.” Here is the surprising grace at the end of a grim passage. The Lord is still in the business of renewing a worn-out servant and calling him close again, back to the waist, back to the work, back to being God’s own voice.

Group Discussion: God said He made His people to “cling” to Him as a loincloth clings to a man’s waist (13:11), wanting them near and not at arm’s length. What does this picture reveal about what God actually desires from His people, and what kinds of things in our lives quietly pull us loose from that nearness?

Personal Reflection: Jeremiah told God honestly that He had become “like a deceitful brook” to him (15:18), and God answered not with a rebuke but with a call to return and be restored (15:19). Where are you most worn down or disappointed with God right now, and what would it look like to bring that honestly to Him rather than drifting away?

Read Jeremiah 13:1–15:21

Study Questions

1. Read 13:1–11. God explains the ruined loincloth: “as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made... Israel and... Judah cling to me... that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory” (13:11). What does this reveal about the purpose of God’s covenant with His people, and what ruins that closeness?
2. The loincloth was ruined not by clinging to the waist but by being buried far off by the Euphrates (13:4–7). Where in your own life do you sense you have let distance grow between you and God, and what “Euphrates” quietly buried you there?
3. Read 13:15–17. Jeremiah pleads, “Hear and give ear; be not proud, for the LORD has spoken,” and warns of darkness coming if they will not listen. How does pride keep a person or a people from hearing God, and how does God’s holiness make this warning an act of mercy rather than cruelty?
4. Jeremiah says that if they still will not listen, “my soul will weep in secret for your pride” (13:17). Whose stubbornness or hardness grieves your heart right now, and how can you carry that grief to God instead of letting it turn into contempt?

5. Read 14:1–9 and 14:19–22. In the drought, the people pray, “Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O LORD, for your name’s sake... we set our hope on you.” What does it look like to appeal to God on the basis of His own name and mercy rather than our worthiness?
6. The drought left even the cisterns empty and the doe abandoning her fawn (14:3–5). When a season of life feels dry and God seems silent, where are you tempted to dig your own “broken cisterns,” and what would it mean to seek the living God instead?
7. Read 15:1–9. God says, “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people.” What does this sobering word teach about the seriousness of persistent, unrepented sin and the reality that hearts and seasons can be hardened past the point of pleading?
8. Intercession is precious, yet here even the greatest intercessors could not turn God’s heart because the people would not turn (15:1–7). Who are you praying for that has so far refused to repent, and how do you keep praying faithfully without despairing or presuming on God?
9. Read 15:15–21. Worn out and bitter, Jeremiah says God has become “like a deceitful brook,” and God answers, “If you return, I will restore you... If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth.” How does God deal with a discouraged servant, and what does this teach us about repentance, renewal, and the grace that calls us back to usefulness?

10. Look back over the whole passage, from the loincloth made to cling, through the drought and the hardening, to God's restoring of a weary prophet. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using these chapters to draw you closer to Himself this week, whether by exposing pride, by deepening honest prayer, or by renewing you for His service.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Deuteronomy 10:20, "You shall fear the LORD your God... and hold fast to him," the very clinging the loincloth pictures; Jeremiah 2:13, where the people forsake the fountain of living waters and dig broken cisterns, paired with the drought of chapter 14; Ezekiel 18:20, that the soul who sins shall die and guilt is personal, guarding against any fatalism about the hardening; John 15:4-5, where Christ calls us to "abide in me, and I in you," the New Covenant fulfillment of the clinging loincloth; Galatians 6:9, "let us not grow weary of doing good," a word for every discouraged servant like Jeremiah.

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