

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: The Prophet's Lonely Path; the Sabbath and the Potter

Jeremiah 16:1–18:23

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, these chapters carry three weighty themes. First, the heart: Scripture's realism that "the heart is deceitful above all things" (17:9) cuts against the culture's "follow your heart," yet without teaching that we are born guilty or totally unable to respond. The heart is sick and self-deceiving, and we become guilty when we ourselves sin (Ezekiel 18:20); the remedy is God's searching word and a life rooted in trust. Second, the potter and the clay: the teacher must present God's real sovereignty while guarding hard against a Calvinistic or fatalistic reading. The text itself supplies the guard: God says He will relent of judgment if a nation repents, and will withhold blessing if it does evil (18:7–10). Sovereignty and genuine human response stand together; the clay is never merely passive, and repentance truly matters.

Third, the Sabbath material (17:19–27) requires careful handling. The Sabbath was a sign of the Old Covenant, given to Israel, and it was nailed to the cross and fulfilled in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17). The teacher must not bind a Sabbath, whether Saturday or Sunday, on Christians, nor speak of a "Christian Sabbath." Christians gather to worship and break bread on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). What we draw from the passage is the timeless principle: honor God, and do not let work and commerce so consume us that we lose our devotion to Him.

Beyond doctrine, aim at the heart and life. Jeremiah's costly singleness presses students to count the cost of following God. The tree by the water invites them to examine where their roots actually run when the heat comes. The deceitful heart calls them to stop trusting their own feelings as final and to submit to God's word. And the Potter assures them that God is at work shaping willing clay, fulfilled in Christ who forms us into His image as we yield to Him.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 16:1–13. God forbids Jeremiah to marry or have children as a sign of the coming judgment, then explains it is "because they have forsaken me... and have gone after other gods." What does the costliness of this sign reveal about the seriousness of sin and about a prophet's call to embody, not just announce, God's word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open with the sheer cost of this command. God tells Jeremiah, "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters" (16:2). In ancient Judah, marriage and children were the very

shape of a meaningful life. To forgo them was to accept loneliness, the loss of legacy, and the pity or scorn of neighbors. God asks His prophet to live as a sign, not merely to speak one.

Teach that Jeremiah's empty house was itself a sermon. The children born in that doomed generation would perish (16:3-4); the prophet's childlessness silently testified that this was no time for ordinary life as usual. His life embodied the message. Prophets in Scripture often had to be the word before they could preach it.

Connect this to the seriousness of sin. The reason given is stark: "they have forsaken me... and have gone after other gods" (16:11). The costliness of the sign matches the gravity of the rebellion. God does not use extravagant signs for trivial things; the weight of Jeremiah's sacrifice signals the weight of Judah's sin.

Point gently toward Christ. The pattern of embodying the word reaches its height in the Lord Jesus, who did not merely announce salvation but became it, the Word made flesh, paying personally for the message He carried. Faithful servants still bear the truth in their bodies and lives, not just their words.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The prophet called to embody, not merely announce, God's word (16:2).
- The costliness of the sign matching the seriousness of the sin (16:11).
- Sin as forsaking God and going after other gods.
- The pattern fulfilled in Christ, the Word made flesh who embodied salvation.
- Faithful witness borne in our lives, not only our speech.

Discussion Prompts

- Why did God have Jeremiah live the message and not just preach it?
- What does the high cost of this sign reveal about how serious Judah's sin was?
- How does our own life, not just our words, bear witness to God's truth?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jeremiah's obedience cost him marriage, children, and ordinary comforts (16:2-9). What is God asking you to surrender or to look different in for His sake, and what makes that surrender hard?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question takes Jeremiah's costly obedience and turns it toward the student. Following God sometimes means our lives look different, and that difference can be lonely. Most of us would rather blend in than stand out for Christ.

Help people name real costs without melodrama. For some it is the social cost of convictions about marriage, purity, or honesty; for others a career limited by integrity, a relationship strained by faith, a comfort surrendered for service. The point is not to manufacture suffering but to face honestly where obedience already costs us.

Encourage them to entrust the cost to God. Jeremiah did not understand all that his singleness accomplished, but he obeyed and trusted. We are asked to do the same, surrendering what we give up into the hands of a God who sees and rewards.

Tie it to the promise of Jesus, who said no one who has left house or family for His sake will fail to be repaid (Mark 10:29–30). Costly obedience is never wasted in God's economy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Counting the cost of following God (Luke 14:28).
- The loneliness that sometimes comes with faithful obedience.
- Entrusting our sacrifices to a God who sees and rewards.
- The promise that obedience is never wasted (Mark 10:29–30).

Discussion Prompts

- Where is following God making your life look different from those around you?
- What is the surrender that feels most costly to you right now?
- How can you entrust that cost to God rather than carry it with resentment?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 17:5–8. God contrasts the man who “trusts in man... whose heart turns away from the LORD,” a shrub in the desert, with the man who trusts in the LORD, “like a tree planted by water.” What is the difference between these two lives, and what does it mean to be rooted in God rather than in the flesh?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 5–8 set two lives side by side. The man who “trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD,” becomes “like a shrub in the desert,” parched and barren. The man who trusts in the LORD becomes “like a tree planted by water,” green and fruitful even in drought. The difference is the location of the roots.

Teach that this is not about circumstances but about source. Both the shrub and the tree may face heat and drought; the question is where each is rooted. The shrub is cut off from water; the tree sends its roots by the stream. To trust in flesh, our own strength, other people, human schemes, is to be rooted in a dry place.

Note that the tree is not promised an absence of heat. “It does not fear when heat comes... is not anxious in the year of drought” (17:8). The drought still comes. The rooted believer is not exempt from hardship; he is unshaken in it, still bearing fruit because his roots reach living water.

This is Psalm 1 set to Jeremiah’s music. The blessed life is the rooted life. Under the New Covenant, to be rooted is to abide in Christ (John 15) and to be “rooted and built up in him” (Colossians 2:7), drawing our life from Him so that we bear fruit in every season.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two lives contrasted by the location of their roots (17:5–8).
- Trusting in flesh versus trusting in the LORD as the dividing line.
- The rooted believer unshaken by, not exempt from, hardship.
- The echo of Psalm 1 and fulfillment in being rooted in Christ (Colossians 2:7; John 15).
- Fruitfulness in drought as the mark of a life sourced in God.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between trusting in flesh and trusting in the LORD?
- Why is the tree by the water unshaken even when the drought comes?
- What does it mean practically to sink your roots into Christ?

Question 4

Student Question:

The tree by the water “does not fear when heat comes” and “is not anxious in the year of drought” (17:8). When the “heat” and “drought” of life come, where do your roots actually run, and how can you sink them deeper into the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses the tree-and-shrub image into the student’s own life. When the heat comes, a crisis, a loss, a fear, our roots show. We instinctively reach for whatever we are actually rooted in.

Help people see where their roots run by watching their reactions to pressure. When trouble hits, do they run first to control, to money, to a person, to distraction, or to God? The drought reveals the root system we cannot see in fair weather.

Encourage the deepening of roots in ordinary seasons. Roots grow in the quiet daily disciplines, time in the word, prayer, worship, fellowship, so that when the heat comes the tree is already drawing on the stream. We do not sink roots in the storm; we sink them before it.

Make it concrete. Ask each person to name one root-deepening practice they will renew this week, and one recent 'heat' that revealed where their roots actually run.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pressure reveals where our roots actually run.
- Deepening roots in ordinary seasons, before the heat comes.
- The daily disciplines as the means of sinking roots in God.
- Self-examination through our reactions to trouble.

Discussion Prompts

- When the 'heat' of life comes, where do you instinctively run first?
- What does your reaction to recent trouble reveal about where your roots run?
- What is one practice that would sink your roots deeper into the Lord this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 17:9-10. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick... I the LORD search the heart and test the mind." What does this teach about the human heart and our need for God's searching, and why is self-trust such a spiritual danger?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 9 is one of Scripture's most searching diagnoses: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" The heart here is the inner self, the seat of thought, will, and desire. And the verdict is that it is not merely weak but deceitful, capable of lying to its own owner.

Confront the culture's gospel of "follow your heart." Jeremiah says the heart is exactly what we cannot simply follow, because it deceives us, dressing up our desires as wisdom, our pride as principle, our sin as freedom. Proverbs agrees: "Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool" (Proverbs 28:26). Self-trust is a spiritual trap.

Be careful here for the sake of sound doctrine. This verse describes the heart's deceitfulness and sickness; it does not teach that we are born guilty or totally unable to respond to God. We become guilty when we ourselves sin (Ezekiel 18:20). The heart is sick and self-deceiving, and it needs God's searching and God's word to set it right, not a hopeless fatalism that denies any ability to repent.

Then receive the comfort of verse 10: "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind." The same God who tells us our hearts deceive us is the God who knows them perfectly. This is good news. We are not left to the mercy of our own self-deception; we can pray with David, "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (Psalm 139:23-24), and submit our hearts to His unerring word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deceitfulness and sickness of the human heart (17:9).
- The danger of self-trust and the culture's 'follow your heart' (Proverbs 28:26).
- Avoiding the error of inherited guilt or total inability; guilt comes when we ourselves sin (Ezekiel 18:20).
- God's searching of the heart as good news, not threat (17:10; Psalm 139:23-24).
- Submitting the heart to God's word rather than to our own feelings.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Scripture's view of the heart differ from 'follow your heart'?
- Why is it actually good news that God searches and knows our hearts?
- What does it mean to submit your heart to God's word rather than your feelings?

Question 6

Student Question:

If our own hearts can deceive us (17:9), where have you been trusting your feelings or instincts as your final guide, and what would it look like to submit your heart to God's word and searching instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question takes the deceitful heart and makes it personal. We all have areas where we have quietly made our own feelings the final court of appeal, trusting an instinct or a strong emotion as if it could not be wrong.

Help students see how this works. We feel something strongly, so we assume it must be true or right. We want something badly, so we find reasons to justify it. The deceitful heart is skilled at building a respectable case for what it already wants. Naming this is humbling and freeing.

Point to the remedy: the searching word of God. We test our hearts not against our feelings but against Scripture, which "is living and active... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). When feeling and Scripture conflict, the heart, not the word, must yield.

Make it concrete. Ask each person to name one area, a relationship, a grudge, a desire, a decision, where they have been trusting their feelings as final, and what it would look like to bring it under God's word this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Trusting feelings as the final guide rather than God's word.
- How the heart justifies what it already wants.
- Testing our hearts against Scripture (Hebrews 4:12).

- Submitting feeling to the word when the two conflict.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you been trusting your feelings or instincts as your final guide?
- How does the heart build a respectable case for what it already wants?
- What would it look like to bring that area under God's word this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 17:19–27. God calls Judah to honor the Sabbath and not bear burdens or trade on it. This was a sign commanded under the Old Covenant. What timeless principle about honoring God and guarding our devotion to Him can we draw from this, recognizing that the Sabbath was nailed to the cross and is not bound on Christians today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 19–27 record God's call to Judah to keep the Sabbath, not bearing burdens or trading on that day. The teacher must handle this with care so as not to bind on Christians something God has not bound. The Sabbath was a sign of the Old Covenant, given specifically to Israel (Exodus 31:16–17), part of the law that was fulfilled and set aside in Christ.

State the New Covenant truth plainly. Paul writes that the record of debt with its legal demands was nailed to the cross, so let no one pass judgment on you "with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:14–17). Christians are not bound to keep a Sabbath, and there is no "Christian Sabbath." The first day of the week, the Lord's Day, is when the church gathers to break bread and worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2), not as a transferred Sabbath law but as the day of the Lord's resurrection.

Now draw the timeless principle, which is real and valuable. The Sabbath was meant to keep God's people from being so consumed by work and commerce that they forgot Him. Behind the specific Old Covenant command lies an abiding truth: God must have first place, and we must guard our devotion to Him against the tyranny of endless labor and gain.

Apply it for today. We honor God not by reviving a Sabbath law but by refusing to let work, money, and busyness crowd Him out, by giving Him the Lord's Day in worship, and by ordering our whole week so that He, not commerce, sits on the throne of our time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Sabbath as an Old Covenant sign given to Israel (Exodus 31:16–17).
- The Sabbath and festivals as a shadow nailed to the cross and fulfilled in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17).

- No 'Christian Sabbath'; the church worships on the first day, the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).
- The timeless principle of honoring God and guarding devotion against endless work and commerce.
- Not binding Old Covenant practice on Christians while still drawing its abiding lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- Why are Christians not bound to keep the Sabbath today?
- What is the difference between binding a Sabbath law and honoring God with our time?
- How does the Lord's Day differ from a transferred Sabbath?

Question 8

Student Question:

The Sabbath was meant to keep God's people from being consumed by work and commerce so they would remember Him (17:22–24). Where is the relentless pace of work, money, or busyness crowding out your devotion to God, and how can you guard time to honor Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question draws the abiding principle from the Sabbath passage into daily life. Even though we are not under a Sabbath law, the danger it addressed is very much alive: letting work, money, and busyness consume us until devotion to God is squeezed out.

Help students see the modern pace. We are always reachable, always producing, always one more task behind. Commerce never closes. Without intentional boundaries, the relentless grind of getting and doing can crowd God to the margins of a life.

Encourage practical guarding of time. This is not legalism but wisdom: giving God the Lord's Day wholeheartedly, protecting daily time with Him, and refusing to let the idol of productivity dictate every hour. The goal is a heart and schedule ordered around God, not commerce.

Make it concrete. Ask each person to name one way the pace of work or busyness is crowding out their devotion, and one boundary they will set this week to keep God in first place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The modern tyranny of work, money, and busyness.
- Guarding time and devotion for God without legalism.
- Giving the Lord first place in our schedule, not just our words.
- Setting practical boundaries against the idol of productivity.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is the pace of work or busyness crowding out your devotion to God?
- What does it look like to give God first place in your time this week?
- What is one boundary you could set to honor God with your schedule?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 18:1–11. At the potter’s house God claims the right to shape nations as clay, yet says, “If that nation... turns from its evil, I will relent.” How does this passage hold together God’s sovereignty and genuine human response, and how does it guard us against a fatalistic reading in which our repentance makes no difference?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest block of the lesson, and it must be taught with great care, because the potter and the clay have often been misused. Jeremiah goes down to the potter’s house and watches a vessel get spoiled in the potter’s hand, so the potter reworks it “into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do” (18:4). Then God says, “Can I not do with you as this potter has done?... like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand” (18:6).

Affirm God’s real sovereignty first. God is the Potter; nations and persons are clay. He has the right and the power to shape, to break down, and to build up. This is no small God who must ask our permission. The image humbles us: we are not the potter, and the clay does not instruct the wheel.

But now read on carefully, because the text itself guards against fatalism. God immediately explains how His shaping works: “If at any time I declare concerning a nation... that I will pluck up and break down... and if that nation... turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster” (18:7–8). And the reverse: if He declares blessing and the nation does evil, He will withhold the good (18:9–10). The Potter’s sovereign working actually includes His gracious responsiveness to repentance. This is the opposite of a Calvinistic or fatalistic reading. God is not arbitrarily predetermining who is saved and who is lost regardless of response; He is sovereignly committed to relent when people repent and to judge when they rebel.

Hold sovereignty and human response together, for this is the heart of sound doctrine here. Paul also uses the potter and clay (Romans 9:20–24), but never to teach that the clay is a passive lump with no responsibility; rather, to silence the creature’s arrogant complaint against the Creator while upholding that God patiently calls and that mercy is for all who come. The clay in Jeremiah is responsive clay; its repentance truly changes the shape of what God does. We dare not turn this beautiful picture into a doctrine that makes repentance meaningless.

Land it for the believer and point to Christ. We are clay in the hands of a wise and good Potter who is shaping us, and we are not passive in His hands; we yield, we repent, we cooperate with His work. God’s appeal in verse 11 is exactly this: “Return, every one from his evil way.” The

Potter who shapes also pleads. Under the New Covenant, Christ is the One who forms us into His image (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18) as we surrender to His hands, willing clay being made into vessels “for honorable use” (2 Timothy 2:21).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s real sovereignty as the Potter over nations and persons (18:6).
- The text’s own guard against fatalism: God relents if a nation repents and withholds good if it rebels (18:7–10).
- Sovereignty and genuine human response held together; repentance truly changes God’s dealings.
- Guarding against a Calvinistic reading that makes the clay passive and repentance meaningless.
- Paul’s use of the potter (Romans 9:20–24) to humble the creature, not to deny human responsibility or the universal call of mercy.
- The Potter who shapes also pleads, ‘Return, every one from his evil way’ (18:11).
- Christ as the Potter who forms willing clay into His image (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Timothy 2:21).

Discussion Prompts

- How does God’s offer to relent if a nation repents guard us against a fatalistic reading of the potter?
- How do we hold together God’s sovereignty and the truth that our repentance really matters?
- What does it mean to be willing clay that yields to the Potter rather than resists Him?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage, from Jeremiah’s lonely obedience, to the deceitful heart, to the tree by the water, to the clay in the Potter’s hands. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus, the true Potter and the One in whom we are rooted, is shaping you through these chapters this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers the sweep of these chapters: Jeremiah’s lonely, costly obedience; the deceitful heart that needs God’s searching; the tree rooted by the water; and the clay in the Potter’s wise hands. Each is an invitation to be formed into Christ’s likeness.

Resist abstraction. Press for one specific work the Lord is doing: a cost to accept, a root to deepen, a feeling to surrender to His word, or a place to yield as willing clay. Ask each person to choose their one thing.

Tie it directly to Christ, the true Potter who shapes us (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18) and the One in whom we are rooted (Colossians 2:7; John 15). We are formed not by self-effort but by yielding to His hands and abiding in Him.

Invite each person to name their one thing aloud or on paper and to carry it into the week as a matter of prayer and surrender, asking the Lord to keep shaping them into His image.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from study to formation and surrender (James 1:22).
- Christ as the Potter who shapes us into His image (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18).
- Being rooted in Christ and yielding as willing clay.
- The value of naming one concrete step of surrender.

Discussion Prompts

- Which theme is the Lord pressing on you most: costly obedience, the heart, your roots, or yielding as clay?
- What is the one specific way you will yield to the Potter this week?
- How does abiding in Christ, rather than self-effort, change the way you grow?