

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Lesson 9: The Prophet's Lonely Path; the Sabbath and the Potter -- Jeremiah 16:1-18:23

Some commands from God cost everything. In chapter 16 the Lord tells Jeremiah, "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place." Picture what that meant for a man in that culture, where a wife and children were the whole shape of a life, the proof you mattered, the comfort of your old age. God asks Jeremiah to give it up, not as punishment, but as a living sermon. The babies who will be born in Judah will die of disease and famine and sword, and Jeremiah's empty house is meant to make the people stop and ask why. His loneliness is itself a prophecy. Few callings in Scripture are this costly, and few servants pay so personally for the message they carry.

Then God reaches down into the hidden country we all carry and names it plainly: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" This is one of the most searching sentences in the Bible. It does not say other people's hearts are deceitful. It says yours is. The very organ we trust to guide us, "follow your heart," the culture says, is the one organ Scripture warns us not to trust without examination. And then the comfort: "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind." The same God who tells us our hearts are unreliable is the God who knows them perfectly and can be trusted to lead where our own hearts cannot.

But the chapter is not all warning. Tucked into the middle is one of the loveliest pictures in all of Jeremiah: "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit." Set against the man who trusts in flesh and becomes "like a shrub in the desert," here is the secret of a steady life. Roots near the stream do not panic when the heat comes. The believer who is rooted in God is not exempt from drought; he is unshaken by it.

Finally God sends Jeremiah down to a potter's house, and there at the wheel is a parable about God's sovereignty and our response. The clay is spoiled in the potter's hand, so he reworks it into another vessel "as it seemed good to the potter to do." And God says, "Can I not do with you as this potter has done? Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand." It sounds like raw, unconditional power, until you read on: "If that nation... turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster." God is sovereign, yes, but His sovereignty includes His own gracious willingness to respond to repentance. The Potter is not a fatalist. He shapes, and He invites, and the clay is never merely passive in His hands.

Group Discussion: God says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (17:9), and then, "I the LORD search the heart" (17:10). Our culture

constantly tells us to “follow your heart.” How does Scripture’s view of the heart differ, and why is it good news that God knows our hearts better than we know them ourselves?

Personal Reflection: Jeremiah obeyed a costly command, remaining single and alone as a sign to the people (16:1–4), trusting God with a life that looked very different from everyone else’s. Where is following God making your life look different or costing you something right now, and how can you entrust that cost to Him?

Read Jeremiah 16:1–18:23

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?

4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 1:1–3, the blessed man like a tree planted by streams of water, the song behind Jeremiah 17:7–8; Proverbs 28:26, “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool,” underscoring the deceitful heart; Romans 9:20–24, Paul’s use of the potter and clay, read alongside God’s offer to relent to show sovereignty and mercy together; Colossians 2:14–17, the Sabbath and festivals as a shadow nailed to the cross and fulfilled in Christ, so they are not bound on Christians; Acts 20:7, the disciples gathering on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, for worship.

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