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**Core Seminar**

**Old Testament**

**Class 21: Jeremiah & Lamentations**

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**Introduction**

Today we’ll return to the Major Prophets. We’re going to study Jeremiah and Lamentations, both written by Jeremiah. Just a reminder: the reason we’re moving backward in the Old Testament, instead of just taking the books in canonical order isn’t to confuse you! We’re trying to understand the flow of redemptive-history. That is, we’re trying to understand the historical account of how God has been working through history to redeem a people to Himself. Ultimately, to prepare the way for His Son, Jesus Christ. Though the Old Testament is comprised of 39 books, they come together to tell *one* story. We’re trying to take that story in an order that helps us understand it better.

**[PRAY]**

**JEREMIAH**

**Context**

Now, what’s happening as Jeremiah is writing? The Babylonians are threatening the Southern Kingdom, Judah. As the book progresses, Judah is invaded. By the time we reach the end, the people have been dragged away in three waves of exile (in 605, 597, and 586 BC). After the last wave, the Babylonians razed the city of Jerusalem to the ground, including Solomon’s great temple. You can read about all of this in 2 Kings 22-25 and 2 Chronicles 34-36.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jeremiah himself lived and prophesied through all this.

Why did God allow this to happen? That’s the question 1 and 2 Kings answer. The covenant people have been involved in idolatry for decades. They’ve worshipped every strange deity from Baal to Molech to “the queen of heaven,” and engaging in such acts of “worship” as temple prostitution and child sacrifice. That, on top of open dishonesty, corruption, injustice, adultery, oppression of the helpless, slander, and so on. They’d been sent prophets for a long time, but they would not repent. The people have made shipwreck of the covenant. Now Jeremiah is announcing the covenant curses that were written into the covenant from day one in Deuteronomy 27 and 28. But even as Jeremiah prophecies this destruction, he also, describes God’s way forward to complete his plan of redemption—more clearly than any prophet we’ve studied so far.

One thing Jeremiah talks a lot about is our hearts. Our sinful, unchangeable-by-human-effort hearts. So let’s start by talking about those hearts. ***How does God change a sinful human heart?*** (Push the class to think not merely about justification but sanctification as well.)

**Theme**

Now Jeremiah is a big book, and no short theme statement can really do justice to the whole thing. But let me try to encapsulate the theological center of the book with this statement:

*The old covenant has failed; not because it itself was defunct, but because the people were not able to keep it due to their sinful hearts. Therefore a new covenant is needed which will involve new hearts for the people of God.*

If you’re familiar with Jeremiah, it may sound to you like I just made a bee line for chapter 31. Not so. Chapter 31 is simply the theological mountain top that the rest of the book is climbing to and descending from. This is what the whole book is about. The question that Jeremiah sets out to answer is, Why was the covenant broken? In a deeper sense than “the people sinned.” The conclusion he comes to very early in the book is that the covenant itself was just fine. The problem lies with the people. They *have not been able* to keep it. I’ll repeat that: they are *unable*. They cannot keep the covenant, and it’s because they’re hearts are in love with their sin. And if their hearts are the problem, that’s a pretty hopeless situation since corrupt hearts cannot change themselves. So for the first 28 chapters Jeremiah is *very* pessimistic. The people *cannot* keep the covenant because they have these depraved hearts, and they *cannot* change their hearts. The *only* possible solution is if God *changes their hearts* and makes them fit, from the inside out, to participate again in the covenant. Though, remember back to Deuteronomy where God promises to “circumcise your hearts:” this is something he’s already promised to do.

The book is structured, as you see on the back of your handout, in five basic pieces. The first 29 chapters prophesy God’s judgment against his people. Then we break in chapters 30-33 with a beautiful description of God’s ultimate solution to this problem: new hearts. Chapters 34-45 then shift back to prophesy the final destruction of Jerusalem. Chapters 46-51 address the wickedness of the nations, including the invading Babylonians. And finally chapter 52 recounts the fulfillment of much of this prophesy: the invasion and decimation of Judah. All together, it amounts to the longest book in the Bible.

**I. Major Themes**

OK. With that as intro, we’ll tackle the first 30 chapters by focusing in on five important themes.

**1. Breach of Covenant.** First, throughout the book of JeremiahGod accuses Judah of breaking his covenant. He first lays out the charges in 2:9-12. Judah is guilty of nothing less than giving up the true God in exchange for worthless idols.

**9**“Therefore I still contend with you,
declares the Lord,
    and with your children's children…

…**11**Has a nation changed its gods,
    even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
    for that which does not profit.
**12**Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
    be shocked, be utterly desolate,
declares the Lord,

As the book continues, God’s condemnation grows more graphic, more passionate, and more intense. He describes Judah’s sin as adultery. “as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel” (3:20). He describes their sin as prostitution. “By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom.” (3:2)

So . . . Judah’s broken the covenant. That’s the first theme.

**2. Repeated, Widespread Sin.** But second, the breach of covenant was not a one-time event. It was a repeated habit that that pervaded society. And for hundreds of years God had sent prophet after prophet to them. Listen to Jeremiah talk about his own ministry and those before him in chapter 25.

**3**“For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. **4**You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets, **5**saying, ‘Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers from of old and forever.

It’s gotten so bad that God says, “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!” (15:1).

Instead the people have listened to the lying words of false prophets. 6:14:

They have healed the wound of my people lightly,
    saying, ‘Peace, peace,’
    when there is no peace.

False prophets tell the people what they want to hear instead of the truth they *need* to hear. I wonder how many preachers today are guilty of the same thing. In how many of our churches is God’s word not preached faithfully, in such a way as people are changed. As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 4:20, “For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.” Our standard should not simply be, “did the preacher say things that weren’t untrue” (though even the false prophets in Jeremiah’s day failed that test, 7:8). Rather, our standard should be, “is the *whole* counsel of God preached such that people are being changed?”

**3. Total Depravity.** Third, let’s look more deeply at *why* this happened. Yes, this disaster is the result of the broken covenant. But a deeper question than that: *Why was the covenant broken? Why* couldn’t the people keep it? Jeremiah says in 6:10, “their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.” They *cannot* hear the word of God, because they have no desire to. Lack of desire so severe it equates to lack of ability.

Going even deeper, Jeremiah tells us in 17:1 “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart.” Sin is carved, etched, onto the heart! Look at verse 9. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” In 18:12 God tells Jeremiah to call on Judah to repent, but tells Jeremiah to expect Judah to reply “That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.” The people are *led* by these evil hearts. Sin *drives and controls* them.

Finally, let’s read 13:23.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin
    or the leopard his spots?
Then also you can do good
    who are accustomed to do evil.

Not only does the entrenched sin of a man’s heart cripple and control him, it won’t release him. As we just read in 17:9, the heart is beyond cure.

In its natural state, the human heart is incapable of hearing God’s word. It’s restricted in its desires, emotions, and feelings because sin is carved onto it. Sin is its slave master, driving and controlling it. And there’s no way out. In a word, this is damning! Warning, disaster, logic, and will power are all powerless to turn us back to God. That’s theme #3.

**[Questions]**

**4. Proclamation of Judgment.** Fourth, let’s look at what happens after God charges Judah with breaking the covenant. Jeremiah writes in 11:11-12 “Therefore, thus says the Lord, Behold, I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they make offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble.” God asks, earlier, in 5:7, 9. ““How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of whores.… Shall I not punish them for these things?
declares the Lord?”

God will punish Judah for breaking the covenant. And this is where Jeremiah gets his reputation. In God’s proclamations of judgment we have some of the most harrowing, horrific language in the Bible. 8:13:

When I would gather them, declares the Lord,
    there are no grapes on the vine,
    nor figs on the fig tree;
even the leaves are withered,
    and what I gave them has passed away from them.”

9:22:

‘The dead bodies of men shall fall
    like dung upon the open field,
like sheaves after the reaper,
    and none shall gather them.’

12:11-12:

The whole land is made desolate,
    but no man lays it to heart.
Upon all the bare heights in the desert
    destroyers have come,
for the sword of the Lord devours
    from one end of the land to the other;
    no flesh has peace.

15:7-8:

I have destroyed my people;
    they did not turn from their ways.
I have made their widows more in number
    than the sand of the seas

And it goes on, and on, and on, and on—for 30 chapters. So Jeremiah wails, chapter 6 verse 26:

O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth,
    and roll in ashes;
make mourning as for an only son,
    most bitter lamentation,
for suddenly the destroyer
    will come upon us.

As Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

But there is still one last theme in these chapters:

**5. Judgment as the Undoing of Creation.** The last theme we want to note is the character of God’s judgment. The judgment in Jeremiah isn’t simply the invasion of Judah. It may begin there, but goes much further. It is so complete, it is in fact an undoing of creation instelf. Listen as I read from chapter 4.

**23**I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void;
    and to the heavens, and they had no light.
**24**I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking,
    and all the hills moved to and fro.
**25**I looked, and behold, there was no man,
    and all the birds of the air had fled.
**26**I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert,
    and all its cities were laid in ruins
    before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

Do you hear Genesis 1 in reverse? There is something cosmic, something primal in this judgment that goes well beyond the fate of one nation in the 6th Century BC. 4:28, “For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark; for I have spoken; I have purposed; I have not relented, nor will I turn back.”

**B. Jeremiah the Prophet**

Those are the themes of this first section. Now before going further, let’s look at Jeremiah the man. Think of our word “jeremiad.” It means “long and mournful complaint.” Usually with a negative connotation: the words of a pessimist, a prophet of doom and gloom. Is that Jeremiah?

Jeremiah was a man of God in love with the word of God. He writes in 20:9,

If I say, “I will not mention him,
    or speak any more in his name,”
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
    shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
    and I cannot.

Sometimes we think of God’s inspiration as a gentle breeze carrying God’s messengers forward. Jeremiah experienced it as a driving hurricane, a consuming fire, an irresistible force!

And God’s words earned Jeremiah enemies. Jeremiah records a plot against his life by the priests and false prophets in chapter 26, and he was arrested for treason in chapter 37 because he prophesied the Babylonians would win. The king, recognizing that Jeremiah was a true prophet, privately pulled him out of prison to ask if there is a word from the Lord. “Yes,” Jeremiah replied, “You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.” Jeremiah, arrested, beaten, and on trial for his life, refused to compromise his message! Then Jeremiah challenged the king: “What wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people, that you have put me in prison? Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, ‘The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land’?” What courage!

Jeremiah was driven to speak the judgment of God not out of a melancholy disposition, or clinical depression, but because he loved the word of God and was surrounded by sin. Jeremiah was a man of conviction.

But back to what Jeremiah wrote.

**C. The New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-37**

Happily, Jeremiah is not just about sin and judgment. In this harshest of prophecy, we see promise of God’s continuing plan of redemption. And it isn’t just a glimmer; this is one of the most spectacular passages of promise in all the prophets. We read the theological climax of the book in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

**31**“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, **32**not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. **33**For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **34**And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Notice that in **verse 31** God is promising a *new* covenant here. Remember the problem with the first covenant was not God, or the covenant, it was *the people* and their sinful hearts. The solution of the new covenant is simply: give them *new hearts*! And what makes the new covenant so superior to the old one is that now the law is *within* the people of God. It shapes their desires, wills, wants, and loves. Indeed, they love it.

This becomes possible because God promises to forgive sins, as we heard in verse 34. Now *that* is good news! *That* is gospel! Those of us who have turned from their sin and trusted in Christ in this way do so only because, as we read in Jeremiah, God has given us new hearts. He has given us hearts and minds to love Him with, eyes to see and ears to hear the truth. And desires that are no longer enslaved to sin. But set free to pursue the delight of beholding the majesty of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Do you have this new heart? In New Testament terms, have you been born again? Christianity is not mere intellectual assent to things that happened one weekend outside of Jerusalem two thousand years ago. It is a regeneration of spiritually dead people into a dynamic relationship with the Holy One of the Universe. Is that what you experience? Stare with an intense gaze into the gospel of Jesus, because it is *there* that the glory of God shines forth, to rescue people out of darkness, redeem them from sin, and give new birth.

And keep in mind how much more precious this message is having waded through the first 30 chapters of Jeremiah. If all we ever do is look at climax passages like this, we miss our own depravity that stands in sharp relief to the good news. Use Jeremiah to understand your own complete inability and unwillingness to follow the law of God apart from Christ. And then drink in chapter 31 as the good news it really is.

**D. Judgment Against the Nations and The Destruction of Jerusalem: Jeremiah 46-52**

Well. We could spend much more time on chapter 31, as the New Testament authors do. But for the sake of time, let’s continue. In chapters 34-45, Jeremiah describes the final destruction of Jerusalem. And then chapters 46-51 are prophecies of judgment against other nations, including Egypt, the Philistines, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and a few others. Like the other prophets, Jeremiah condemns the gentile nations for pride, insolence, boasting, foolishness, for mistreating God’s people, for trusting in riches and military power. This section finally culminates with a lengthy proclamation of judgment against Babylon itself. Babylon was the instrument God used to exact his punishment on Judah, and Jeremiah had been accused of treason by prophesying Babylon’s victory. But Jeremiah is no traitor. He knows that even though God is using Babylon, Babylon is not guiltless. Babylon is condemned because she rejoiced in the downfall of God’s people (50:11). And because Babylon was guilty of cruelty, oppression, and murder against God’s people. Therefore Babylons overthrow was the “vengeance of the Lord,” (50:15). Babylon is God’s “war club” with which he shatters nations and kingdoms (51:20ff); nonetheless, God says, “I am against you, O destroying mountain,
declares the Lord, which destroys the whole earth” (51:25). Though God judges his people, he will ultimately judge their oppressors as well. As Jeremiah says,

“For Israel and Judah have not been forsaken
    by their God, the Lord of hosts,
but the land of the Chaldeans [that is, the Babylonians] is full of guilt
    against the Holy One of Israel” (51:5).

Finally, Jeremiah records the fulfillment of his main prophecy. We read in chapter 52: “On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled…[The Babylonians] burned the house of the Lord, and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down…So Judah was taken into exile out of its land.” The stay of God’s people in the promised land was seemingly at an end, and the nation has failed. So ends the prophecy of Jeremiah. Oh—except for the last few verses. Look at verses 31-34. Remember Jehoiachin? An earlier king of the line of David? He lives—and in fact, is invited to the king’s table. What an interesting way to end this chronicle of judgment. The seed of the woman, the seed of David, is still alive. God will still make good on his promises.

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

**LAMENTATIONS**

**Context**

Lamentations is set right after God has destroyed His own city, Jerusalem. In this poem Jerusalem is personified as a woman mourning for her lost children and has no one to comfort her.

**Theme**

The message to those left behind after the destruction of the city is this:

*We are in mourning because God has done this, even though it’s our fault. Now we need Him to change our hearts, for He will again comfort us.*

Yes, I said that the focus of the book is that *God* has destroyed His city. The author makes that very clear in this book. This is another one of those books that is strong on the sovereignty of God. Nonetheless, it’s the people’s own fault that this has happened. Yet, as with every prophet, there is hope. And just like the book of Jeremiah, hope is held out in the prospect of receiving new hearts from God.

The book of Lamentations is highly structured. It’s a series of acrostic poems written in the rhythm of a funeral dirge. The overall structure puts the theme of God’s compassion, in chapter 3, in the center of the book, with discussions of sin and judgment on either end in chapters 2 and 4. We’ll finish our time together this morning by walking through these poems.

**The City’s Sin and the Judge’s Wrath**

The first poem recounts the fall of Jerusalem, and the sins of the people that brought about God’s judgment. “How lonely sits the city, that was full of people!” he cries (v1). “Her foes have becomes the head, her enemies prosper” (v5). Worst of all, this desolation is deserved. “Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her.” (v8).

The second and fourth poems expand on the themes of sin and judgment, echoing much of what we saw in Jeremiah. “How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!” he says (2:1), “The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob” (2:2). In the fourth poem the author says “The Lord gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations” (4:11).

**The Compassion of God**

But in chapter 3, the middle of the poem, the theme changes and we read a meditation on God’s compassion and goodness. “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness…It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (3:21-26)

A few verses later the author offers a meditation on the twin roles played by God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?” (v38-39). Both blessings and curses come from God, but we are responsible for our choices. There’s no apologetic for that; it’s just affirmed, and accepted.

Finally, the fifth and final poem in chapter 5 ends with a recognition of God’s rightful kingship and a plea for his mercy. Verse 21:

“But you, O Lord, reign forever;
    your throne endures to all generations.
Why do you forget us forever,
    why do you forsake us for so many days?
Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!
    Renew our days as of old” (21-23)

Even in the midst of God’s most severe judgment, God’s people may still turn to him in hope, plea for mercy, and look forward to renewal. This can be a message of great encouragement and solace in the midst of suffering.

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

**[PRAY]**

1. The teacher may at this time also want to recommend three reference books that any serious student of the Old Testament should have in their personal library: *The New Bible Dictionary* edited by Marshall, Millard, Packer, and Wiseman (published by IVP), *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* edited by Alexander, Rosner, Carson, and Goldsworthy (also published by IVP), and *An Introduction to the Old Testament* by Dillard and Longman (Zondervan). I suppose while we’re at it, we can add *The Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps & Time Lines* [sic] (by Rose Publishing) to this list. These are great reference books for these sorts of historical and biblical-theological issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)