

# Blessing or Curse, You Must Choose! (Jeremiah 16:1-17:27)



1. Glimpse into Jeremiah's Thoughts. Prophets didn't always speak fresh prophetic words. They also spoke from the Scriptures. (C.f. Ps 1:2-3, blessing and curse; Ps. 18:1-2; Is 40:1-2, Is 56:2, etc.) In these chapters we can see clearly the movement of Jeremiah's heart and his personal faith in God. He cries out for 'healing' and 'vindication' in deep loneliness and rejection, and finds fresh 'hope' in God. '*You are my hope in the day of doom.*' (17:17 c.f. 17:7, 13) This was the secret to Jeremiah's inner strength and resilience.
2. Jeremiah's Message in Three Stages. (a) National judgment - Jeremiah embodied the message in 'celibacy' and 'social withdrawal'; (b) Individual message - In the face of the impending judgement, each person was to choose either blessing or a curse for themselves; (c) The nation's problem looked like a societal issue on the surface, but deep down it was a spiritual issue. Jeremiah challenged them concerning the Sabbath law, 'What kind of society do you want to live in? A worshipping community or a commerce driven society?' One produces 'grateful people' leading to peace and continuation of the city, and the other produces 'greedy people' leading to disorder and destruction.

## A. National Judgment (16:1-17:4)

### 1. Principle of the national heritage

(a) Every nation needs their own land to build their identity, security and continuation. Land is 'the primary national heritage' and prosperity depends on it. Wars are fought over it. 'Land/earth/place' is a prominent theme here, mentioned 16 times.

(b) Every nation receives their allotted land from God as their 'heritage'. God owns every inch of this planet. '*The earth the LORD's and all its fullness (Ps. 22:1).*' And He draws each nation's boundary on a 'lease term'. '*And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him...*' (Acts 17:26-27) God redraws the world map throughout history. National borders move as God allocates certain land to a particular people group for a set time. If they fulfill God's purpose, i.e. grope and seek God, their lease term is secure. However, if they depart from God's righteous law sown into the fabric of life, their territory shrinks and eventually disappear from the map.

(c) This universal principle is particularly true of Israel whose land and the boundary lines are written in the terms of their covenant with God unlike other nations (Gen 15:18). Although the land is deeded to them in the covenant, they either get to enjoy the land or forfeit the right to live in the land, depending on their obedience to the Lord. (17:19-27)

(d) If you study the map of Israel from King David's time this is particularly true. When God gave the land to Israel, it was to be maintained in 'holiness'. But when they began departing from God's ways, their borders shrank by internal conflict and external invasion. By Jeremiah's time only two small tribes were left in Judah and a little patch of Negev desert from what was once a great kingdom. And now they have even forfeited the right to live in that little bit of the land.

### 2. Embodying the Message of God

Jeremiah was to not only preach the message, but also to embody the message. He was not to marry. He was not to raise a family of his own. By now Jeremiah was in late twenties or early thirties. Bachelors were so rare in those days there was no Hebrew word for 'bachelor'. How lonely Jeremiah must have been. But God said to Jeremiah - no wife and no children for him. Why?!

(a) To avoid family tragedy: Most of the children born in that generation will not make it to adulthood. Watching your wife and children suffer is just too painful. Their society would degenerate so badly that it would be better to stay single (16:4). Apostle Paul said when unusually intense pressure is on the society it is actually better not to marry (1 Cor 7:26).

(b) Jeremiah was not to attend funeral service to weep for the deceased, or go to wedding parties to celebrate new couples (17:7-8). He was a young single man, and he had to withdraw from all social

interaction. It must have been a very lonely life. Why did God want Jeremiah to live this way? It was a sign that God was removing His affection from the 'city of peace'. *'I have taken away the peace, lovingkindness and mercies' (16:5)* Jeremiah's withdrawal from the village life was prophetic sign of God's withdrawal from His people. *'God had no more family of His own, so Jeremiah also would have no family of his own. God was abandoned by His own family, so Jeremiah would live without his own.'* Who wants to be a prophet? (C.f. Hosea 1:2; Ezekiel 24:15-27 *'Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with one stroke... So I spoke to the people in the morning and at evening my wife died.'*)

**(c)** God said, *'When they ask you why has God done this to us? Then you are to tell them, because your fathers left God, and your generation has become worse than your father's generation. When you get carried away to a new land, there you can worship foreign gods all you want.'*

- Judah's Punishment (17:1-4):** **(a)** The sin of Judah is engraved with iron pen with a diamond tip, which is the hardest material on earth with hardness scale of 10. The horns of the altar that guaranteed the covering for Israel's sins, have become the place of memorial of their idolatry (16:17). *'Wooden images'* lit. Asherah poles were erected beside the altar (c.f. Dt 16:21); **(b)** Therefore Israel's wealth will be plundered first, **(c)** then their 'heritage' (land) will be given away, and the people exiled.
- Israel's Hope is God:** Between the words of judgment Jeremiah looks further ahead and 'poetically' speaks of their return. (16:14-18 c.f. Jer 23:7-8) Interestingly, he speaks of *'double payment for their sins' (16:18)* or *'double destruction' (17:18)*. C.f. Is 40:2. Note that Jesus wept over Jerusalem like Jeremiah. The first exile in Jeremiah's time lasted 70 years, but the second exile lasted 1900 years. That is a long time to be away from home. But God says, *'I will bring them back from the land of the north and from all the lands where I have driven them.'* (17:5). How? *'I will send them 'fishermen' first to fish them out, then I will send 'hunters' to hunt them down.'* (17:16)

Around the turn of last century 'Zionist movement' rose up in Europe, that gathered the Jews back to their land. Afterwards Nazi Germany rose up to hunt them down. No matter how long and how far they have gone from their land, God can still bring them back to their land and establish them as an international influence for good. How? By leading the Gentiles to abandon their worthless idols to serve the living God, the holy One of Israel (16:19-21; C.f. Amos 9:11-12) Instead of seeing the Jews scattered among the Gentiles, Jeremiah sees the Gentiles gathering around Israel.

Jeremiah's voice alternates between *judgment and hope*. Isaiah also has two voices: **(a)** Is. 58:1 (*judgement*) – *'Cry aloud, spare not; Lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.'*; **(b)** Is 62:1 (hope) – *'For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness and her salvation as a lamp that burns.'*

## B. Individual Response (17:5-18)

Every individual person must choose blessing or curse. Even in the midst of judgment each person can still choose their pathway. (C.f. Ps. 1:2-3)

- Two Different Pictures - Two Different Lives (17:5-8)** **(a)** Small stunted dry shrubs struggling to survive in salted area (Heb. juniper tree near Dead Sea) with no fruit to harvest. These are those who trust in the arm of the flesh (human) rather than trusting in God; **(b)** Beautiful aromatic bay tree, which is an evergreen tree with large leaves, standing by the river with a root system reaching deep into the underground water. So, it suffers no dry season but bears fruit all year around. It also has medicinal use as antiseptic. This is the man who trusts in God. He can simply keep going during the tough times because his roots reach beyond the surface and draw directly from the fountain of the living water, the unchanging God (c.f. 2:13).

*This is the challenge to every Christian no matter what they are. Which will you be? How deep is your root system? Does it go beyond the shallow soil of the world's economic system and reach all the way into the unshakable kingdom? Tough times sort out the men from the boys, and tough times are coming. What kind of person will you be? 'Stunted shrub'? Or the 'tree planted by the water'? Jeremiah says, 'The choice is yours.'*

2. **What is the Issue Here?** ‘Man’s heart’, ‘motives’ (17:10). Those who trust in the LORD are blessed, ‘his hope is in the LORD’. But those who trust in man, the ‘arm of the flesh’, are cursed. Why? Because the condition of the fallen human heart is such that it cannot be trusted.

Our hearts are **(a)** deceptive – ‘deceiving’. **(b)** ‘desperately wicked’ – ‘incurable’ (c.f. 30:12). **(c)** Only the LORD can search our hearts and test our minds. That’s why those do NOT trust in their own strength will be blessed by the Lord. **(d)** We learn from the partridges, the foolish birds that sit on other bird’s eggs. They won’t hatch! So are those who gain wealth by unjust ways. They will die the death of a fool (17:11). **(e)** Jeremiah sees the vision of God’s throne, the dwelling place of God lifted high above the earth. This is also a sanctuary and refuge for those who trust in Him and run to Him. (17:12-13 c.f. ‘Heavenly Zion’ in Heb 12).

3. **Jeremiah’s Prayer for Healing:** ‘Lord I am coming to you. Save me, deliver me, and even avenge me.’ (17:14-17). **(a)** Here is a lonely man, a wounded man. People are laughing at him, ‘He is such a doom and gloom preacher. Why hasn’t it happened yet? Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come now!’ (17:15) Jeremiah asks God to heal his weary heart, and starts to praise Him as a way of ascending to the heavenly sanctuary, ‘For you are my praise.’ (17:14). **(b)** Jeremiah’s Legacy (17:16) was this (1) He kept following the Lord – ‘I didn’t abandon your calling. I kept on following You like a shepherd following his Master.’; (2) His motive was right. He did not desire the people’s destruction ‘nor I desired woeful day’; (3) Jeremiah was faithful to his calling. He spoke God’s word rather than man’s word. ‘You know what came out of my lips. It was right there before You.’ So he prays, ‘You are my hope in the day of doom.’ (17:17)

### C. God’s Diagnosis of Israel’s Problem: Sabbath Law (17:19-27)

If Jeremiah 7 is called the Temple Sermon, then Jeremiah 17 can be the ‘Gate Sermon’. All business transactions of the city took place at the busy city gate, through which everyone from kings to commoners went in and out. God told Jeremiah to stand at the gate and speak His words concerning the Sabbath day.

1. The Sabbath law is the fourth command from the Ten Commandments, and it has to do with ‘rest’ (Ex 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15).

**(a)** Jesus said Sabbath was given for man, not man for Sabbath. It was a gift from God to His people. God knows man is not an animal. Animals don’t need Sabbaths, but human beings do. Why? Man needs to be lifted above just working for ‘food to survive.’ He needs to be regularly ‘shut out’ of this world and be ‘shut in’ with God. God instituted the Sabbath law to stop His people from scraping around all day to earn a living to meet their basic need of ‘bread’, but to set apart one whole day, not just 2 hours, out of seven days to seek God for His ‘bread’ – i.e. God’s word. They are to be tuned in with God for the whole day to worship God and reflect on life and to hear His voice. So they would learn to think God’s thoughts and work God’s ‘works’ and ‘rest’ with God.

**(b)** So, God put the Sabbath day as law, Friday 6pm - Saturday 6pm, to take precedence above other days. On the Sabbath they were to unplug from the world and plug in with God. ‘A man who works seven days a week for food constantly (for double pay on weekends?) ceases to live like a man but lives more like an animal.’ Israel was suffering from the drought and inflation as a result of God’s judgement. So they brought their business to the city gate seven days a week, burning the midnight oil, desperately trying to make more money.

**(c)** God gave them a choice. If they honour the Sabbath as a day of return to the LORD and as a day of rest with Him, and recalibrate and revitalise their spiritual life as God’s people this way, then He would let them prosper in the city as long as they want! But if they keep living the same way, i.e. get the Sabbath worship out of the way like a chore so they can rush back to the city gate for the rest of the day to chase money and business deals, then God would burn up that very gate and destroy their palace as well. Why does God mention the Sabbath here? Because it locates the huge underlying issue in the life of His people – the worship of God!

**(d)** Unfortunately, they didn’t choose blessing but curse. The gate of the city was burned down, and the palace destroyed just as Jeremiah prophesized a few years later.

2. What kind of spiritual culture do you want to have in your family and in your church? We all must choose. The more important question is, what kind of culture does God want from His people and His Church? In the Old Testament God commanded tithing, to give Him 10% of our income. The Sabbath law requires that we give the Lord 1/7 = 14% of our time. In the New Testament we are not under the law, but the principle holds the same. It is the decision of our faith. We are blessed when we give God our time and money in a consistent and a disciplined way. If Judah 'hallows the Sabbath day', i.e. set the day apart as holy unto the Lord, then they will have more people deeply connected with God. It means the worship of incense from the burnt offerings will continually rise to the LORD from their city. There will be more 'grateful people' instead of more 'greedy people.' There will be more holy people living unto the Lord rather than people driven like animals for meat.
3. A nation that has no time for God will suffer. A family that has no time for God will suffer. Individual Christians who has no time for God will suffer. (C.f. Is. 56:2 C.f. Prov 23:4-5). That's why in Hebrews Ch4 God challenges His people to 'strive' to enter into His Sabbath rest. It has nothing to do with rules and regulations. All seven days are holy for God's people, for everyday belongs to the Lord and all our time belongs to the Lord.

But at the heart it has to do with 'worship of God' and 'ceasing from our own works'. We need to give God time if we want to grow in Him. How about giving each Sunday wholly to God in a spiritual discipline of worship, study, and fellowship? Jeremiah asked, 'What kind of nation do you want to live in?' What kind of people do you want to be before God? One will result in blessing, the other will not. It is our choice.