

KERUX COMMENTARIES

JEREMIAH AND
LAMENTATIONS

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A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

DUANE GARRETT
CALVIN F. PEARSON



Jeremiah and Lamentations: A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE TO THE SERIES

Since words were first uttered, people have struggled to understand one another and to know the main meaning in any verbal exchange.

The answer to what God is talking about must be understood in every context and generation; that is why Kerux (KAY-rukes) emphasizes text-based truths and bridges from the context of the original hearers and readers to the twenty-first-century world. Kerux values the message of the text, thus its name taken from the Greek *kērux*, a messenger or herald who announced the proclamations of a ruler or magistrate.

Biblical authors trumpeted all kinds of important messages in very specific situations, but a big biblical idea, grasped in its original setting and place, can transcend time. This specific, big biblical idea taken from the biblical passage embodies a single concept that transcends time and bridges the gap between the author's contemporary context and the reader's world. How do the prophets perceive the writings of Moses? How does the writer of Hebrews make sense of the Old Testament? How does Clement in his second epistle, which may be the earliest sermon known outside the New Testament, adapt verses from Isaiah and also ones from the Gospels? Or what about Luther's bold use of Romans 1:17? How does Jonathan Edwards allude to Genesis 19? Who can forget Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and his appropriation of Amos 5:24: "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream'"? How does a preacher in your local church today apply the words of Hosea in a meaningful and life-transforming way?

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Publisher's Preface to the Series

- A contemporary big idea for every preaching unit
- Present-day meaning, validity, and application of a main idea
- Creative presentations for each primary idea
- Key questions about the text for study groups

Many thanks to Jim Weaver, Kregel's former acquisitions editor, who conceived of this commentary series and further developed it with the team of Jeffrey D. Arthurs, Robert B. Chisholm, David M. Howard Jr., Darrel L. Bock, Roy E. Ciampa, and Michael J. Wilkins. We also recognize with gratitude the significant contributions of Dennis Hillman, Fred Mabie, Paul Hillman, Herbert W. Bateman IV, and Shawn Vander Lugt who have been instrumental in the development of the series. Finally, gratitude is extended to the two authors for each Kerux volume; the outside reviewers, editors, and proofreaders; and Kregel staff who suggested numerous improvements.

—*Kregel Publications*

AUTHORS' DEDICATION

The authors dedicate this volume:

Duane to his wife Patty

Calvin to his wife Jan

Jointly they dedicate this volume to their
mutual lifelong friend and brother in Christ,
Jesse H. Outlaw (1951–2020)

EXEGETICAL AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

In the course of writing this commentary, I have concluded that Jeremiah is the prophet for our times. I am old enough to remember well the 1970s and '80s. Those years had their difficulties, but there was much to be optimistic about. The "Jesus Movement" swept across America, and Billy Graham was at the height of his powers. He could fill large stadiums night after night with people coming to hear the gospel. It seemed we were in the midst of a new great awakening. Campus Crusade and Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship thrived, and tens of thousands of Christian students went to the Urbana conference on missions and evangelism. On the Roman Catholic side, John Paul II was revitalizing his church. Politically, it was a time of optimism. Even those who did not like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher would have to admit that confidence, not despair, was the mood of the day. The Soviet Union collapsed, and the states of eastern Europe rapidly overthrew their communist governments. The cold war ended, and the future looked bright indeed.

A generation has passed, and the change is astonishing. The church is in serious decline in the west, nowhere more so than in America. The culture has embraced moral norms that recently were unthinkable. Society is dangerously polarized. We have encountered new and unexpected crises, and many threats seem to be on the horizon. One might be pardoned for echoing the sentiment cited in Psalm 11:3, "When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

In all this, we only repeat the experience of Jeremiah. He began his ministry under the great reforming king, Josiah. The shrines of the idols were removed, the law was rediscovered, the nation recommitted itself to its covenant with God, and the cycle of sin and punishment seemed to be ending at last. That great and wicked empire, Assyria, finally collapsed. But Josiah was slain by Pharaoh Neco, and under his sons Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, Judah embraced paganism with a vengeance. They demonstrated their rediscovered zeal by sacrificing their children in the Hinnom Valley. Jeremiah was cancelled; he was vilified as a traitor and heretic. He could only watch from his prison cell as Babylon sacked Jerusalem. History may not repeat itself, but it surely does have echoes.

I wish to express my deep thanks to Kregel for allowing me to participate in writing a commentary on this most timely book. And I am especially grateful that I was able to do it with my lifelong friend and dear brother, Calvin Pearson. As we Christians consider Jeremiah and Lamentations within our own perilous time, may God be with us all.

—Duane A. Garrett

PREACHING AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

Jeremiah and Lamentations are books about God's working in, through, and on His people. We live in a different century, but we have the same deceitful hearts as our spiritual ancestors, and we serve the same loving Father whose compassions and mercies are new every morning.

Anytime one preaches or teaches the Old Testament, one must keep the context of the full canon in mind. However, I would suggest that one should not turn too quickly to other passages, lest you end up preaching a passage from Ephesians and only use Jeremiah or Lamentations as an illustration. If we are not careful, we could end up preaching Ephesians and not Jeremiah.

Of course, our preaching is to be Christian. Our approach is to present the message of a pericope, knowing that the message can be more personal and more fulfilling because of Christ's work for us. The message is the same for us as it was for the ancient readers, but with Christ the understanding and application becomes richer. I often mention Jesus's work specifically, but at times it is assumed.

Sermons should have a central idea, whether it is called a theme, a main idea, or a "big idea." However, such a unifying idea is only a tool to assist in communicating the text. Our purpose is to present God's living and active Word.

My work is a starting place for effective preaching and teaching. I like to think this work is simply my sitting down with you and dialoguing about how to preach or teach a passage. I pray that as you read what we have written, God's Spirit will be at work in you. Perhaps he will use my sermonic suggestions as seeds that will help grow effective structures, illustrations, and applications for your setting.

—Calvin F. Pearson

PREACHING AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the Lord's empowerment and the impact of many people on my life, I would have never been able to write this volume.

First and foremost, is my wife of forty-six years, Jan Howell Pearson, who supported, edited, and greatly encouraged me throughout the process.

Since my area is the preaching of the text, I am greatly indebted to all those who taught me. Five stand out: Duane Litfin, Elliot Johnson, John Reed, Haddon Robinson, and Don Sunukjian. And, I thank my students and colleagues, with whom I was privileged to co-labor.

Much of my preaching skill and style was forged through the churches which God entrusted me to pastor: Calvary Baptist, Seagoville, TX; Bay Area First Baptist, League City, TX; and Hopevale Church, Saginaw, MI.

My use of the threefold movement from exegesis, to the theological focus, and then to the preaching idea was practiced and refined by two pastoral groups of which I was a part. We would meet twice a year to work not only on sermons, but also on each other's walk with Christ. Each group had a core of pastors. The first group, which met in the late 1980s, included Lane Fusilier, Andy Seidel, and Woody Woodward. The second group met during the 1990s and included Kevin Butcher, Carlton Harris, Nathan Mains, Jeff Manion, and Cecil Sanders.

Lastly, Duane Garrett's scholarship obviously forms the foundation for my homiletical contribution, but he also was a major part of the Lord's work in the foundation of my life. We grew up literally across the street from each other. We played together, prayed together, and had many teenage theological discussions, and remain close friends to this day.

Thank you, to all of these and dozens of others, for being God's tool to shape and refine my homiletics and my life. May he use this volume to bring glory to himself.

—A fellow servant of the Savior,
Calvin F. Pearson

OVERVIEW OF ALL PREACHING PASSAGES

Jeremiah 1:1–3

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The superscript's reference to three named kings—from righteous Josiah to apostate Jehoiakim and Zedekiah—ending with the fall of Jerusalem gives the essential facts about the book's historical setting and implies that its theme is how and why Jerusalem, the city of David and of the temple, was destroyed.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

As evil becomes triumphant, people develop an inverted sense of right and wrong and build their lives on lies until judgment becomes inevitable, yet God provides a witness and shows the way to salvation revealed in several oracles that bring hope.

PREACHING IDEA

When we see God's judgment, look for and embrace his restoration.

PREACHING POINTERS

God wanted to dig more deeply, so most of Jeremiah's words identified sins and the consequential judgment. Motivational words without truth are meaningless and ineffective. God wanted Israel to see the depth of their sin. Then they would be ready for his forgiveness and redemption.

God wants to encourage us today. Posters of eagles soaring over mountains and dolphins jumping through waves with short motivational words have their place, but God wants to motivate people more deeply. Saying that "a journey begins with a first step" or "when the going gets tough, the tough get going" can help, but these words only deal with the surface. God wants to motivate our hearts. Jeremiah shows us that we are full of sin, but he also shows us the amazing grace and redemption that is available to us. To motivate us from our hearts, our hearts need to be changed. If we don't admit that we desperately need God's forgiveness and empowerment, we will be unprepared to live out his life in the bleak and dark world that we live in.

Jeremiah 1:4–19

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Jeremiah's commission account marks him as a great prophet in manner of Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah. It also foreshadows the ordeals he will endure. The passage first describes God's call of a reluctant Jeremiah, and then declares that he must be armored by God to withstand the opposition he will face. This informs the reader that Jeremiah was genuinely chosen by

Overview of All Preaching Passages

God and that the hostility he endured is a mark of his greatness; it does not imply he was a failed prophet.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God's messengers each have a distinctive call, face specific challenges, require unique empowerment, and can be confident in proclaiming the word. But in this task, "success" is not defined by popularity or even by bringing about great changes for good. Rather, the only thing that matters is that the preacher is faithful in the face of great opposition as he receives the message and proclaims it.

PREACHING IDEA

God's messenger needs God's assurances and empowerment to proclaim God's message.

PREACHING POINTERS

This passage is often applied primarily to fellow messengers of God's truth. While this might be an acceptable application, it does not take into account that most of those who read this when it was first written were not in the role of heralds, but listeners. Jeremiah's divine appointment and message gave him courage and assurance; it also guided listeners to a submissive attitude. They needed to know by whose authority a prophet was speaking or writing. This was not the mere authority of a governor or king; this message had the highest authority.

Today God's call of Jeremiah encourages those of us who preach; but even more, this first episode of Jeremiah's narrative sets forth that this book has the authority of God. For a culture such as modern, or postmodern, America where the individual's emotions seem to carry the most authority, it is important that congregations know and remember that this message is from God—and that makes all the difference. This book is not Jeremiah's devotional thoughts; it is the very word of God. When the Bible is proclaimed, it is not the preacher's devotional words about God; it is God's authoritative word. As preachers we cannot change how a congregation listens, but we can have a level of expectation that does affect them as we view our role more seriously.

Jeremiah 2:1–3:10

EXEGETICAL IDEA

A series of vivid metaphors describes how Israel's apostasy has caused the nation to be completely perverse—at the same time both self-righteous and wicked while transferring its love to stone gods and to nations that hate Israel. A series of vivid metaphors repeatedly make the points that Judah is incurably apostate and that this has robbed the nation of its identity, its good sense, its dignity, and its innocence.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Turning from God is never done in isolation from other ethical and ideological areas of life, allowing a people to be apostate but otherwise culturally and morally healthy. Apostasy leads to immorality, cruelty, twisted thinking, misplaced affection, and a refusal to acknowledge guilt. Those who reject the truth will inevitably embrace bizarre and foolish lies.

PREACHING IDEA

When we give up on seeking the Lord, sin will be seeking us.

PREACHING POINTERS

It must have been hard for the people to hear this sermon when it was first preached. Being told that you are suffering the consequences of years of sinning is not what anyone wants to hear. The first hearers of the written form of the message could distance themselves by saying, “That is what our forefathers did; we are suffering because of their sin,” and miss the point of Jeremiah’s message. Jeremiah is not blaming the fathers; he is warning the children.

If not careful, we can only present this passage as a description of how bad Israel sinned and how severe the terrible consequences. The temptation is to study this from a distance, but those who first heard the sermon and those who later read, including us, are all in the same family of God. In a sense, they are our people; we are not outsiders. These words are for us, to warn and explain the tragic results of our sin and to lead us to repentance.

Jeremiah 3:11–4:4

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God calls on Judah to repent, carefully defining what that means and what the benefits are, while also acknowledging that Judah is so deep in rebellion that they cannot repent. This passage, therefore, explores the meaning of repentance while also explaining why many people cannot do it. In addition, it asserts that God does not take pleasure in punishing sin but mourns over the recalcitrance of people whose hearts have turned to stone.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God’s appeals for repentance are always real, but sometimes the audience is incapable of receiving them. In such a case, the prophetic preacher must continue to explain why repentance is necessary and how the people should do it, but this does not mean that the preacher embraces any false hopes regarding his audience and the state of their hearts.

PREACHING IDEA

It’s not enough to cry for help—we must repent.

PREACHING POINTERS

The caricature of the radical preacher holding a sloppily painted sign of just the one word, “Repent,” gives the message of this passage an unfortunate negative barrier to overcome. To be faithful to present this passage, in a sense, requires us to do just that: hold up a sign that says “Repent.” But there is more on the sign than just that one word; there are guidelines to true repentance. The better word to use might be Jeremiah’s word: Return.

The passage presents what is necessary for true repentance or a true returning to the Lord, but it is not void of the same passion of the person holding the sign calling for repentance. It is serious business because our sin is a serious rejection of God. But the emotion doesn’t end there. God calls for repentance in order to bless us.

Jeremiah 4:5–6:30

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Judah persistently rejects correction from God's prophet and lives under the illusion that they deserve no punishment; but God persistently warns them that the Babylonians are at the gates, ready to bring his punishment down on them. This structure of this passage is driven by a lengthy series of alternating texts, first describing how the Babylonian invader is coming upon them and then asserting that the people prefer to believe lies that they are safe and will suffer no harm. These alternating texts vividly bring home the lesson that faith in a false ideology leads to ruin.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Behavior has consequences. Sin deceives people, so that they deny both their guilt and the consequences of their deeds, but they will ultimately face the harsh reality of retribution. Jerusalem continued to think that idols, inept leaders, foreign allies, and the presence of God's temple could guarantee their safety even as the day of ruin came upon them.

PREACHING IDEA

Our self-deception is our most dangerous sin.

PREACHING POINTERS

This long passage has a constant theme that Jeremiah keeps repeating with creative and accurate descriptions of Judah's lifestyle and their unwillingness to be honest about their sin and the coming invasion. They are either ignoring or misrepresenting the truth from God's law and Jeremiah's preaching. They are deceiving themselves. In the end, this deception is so deep and so common that they no longer can even see the truth. They are "rejected silver" (6:30).

While Jeremiah is saying people can be so self-deceived that they can't respond to the truth, the application of this passage is for those who will listen and respond. It is somewhat like the unpardonable sin. If you think you may have committed it, you haven't. If one is worried or concerned that they might be self-deceived, then there is hope that they can hear and repent. But it seems that there are some whose self-deception is so deep that they cannot even hear the truth. In describing the self-deception of Judah, this passage helps us see ways that we deceive ourselves and calls us to honesty and authenticity. If we are listening, then there is hope.

Jeremiah 7:1–8:12

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Judah uses religious activity, some legitimate and some illicit, as a cover for their continuing disobedience to God. Their delusions include thinking that having the temple would save them and that their idols could protect them. Against this, Jeremiah laments the coming desolation of the land and the exile of the people.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Religious activity is no substitute for true repentance, obedience, and a living relationship with God. Those who seek to use their "religion" as a cover for a true fear of God may do

Overview of All Preaching Passages

some things right, but they will exaggerate its significance. They will also insert false beliefs and practices into their religious system.

PREACHING IDEA

The melodies of worship should change the motions in our lives.

PREACHING POINTERS

The sinful practices of Judah show us how important it is to examine our worship. It is good to step back and evaluate what we do in corporate worship. Most churches have a pattern or order that is followed on most Sundays. The only changes in the routines are the songs sung and the passages preached. The measure of effective worship is not how well we perform these routines that take place on Sunday morning, but how well we live after the worship.

There is a close relationship between worship and living in God's blessing. If we let the ceremonial routines be an end unto themselves, then we are exchanging the worship of routines for the worship of God. And, we are also in danger of terrible sins.

Jeremiah 8:13–9:26

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This passage engages the emotional impact of the sin and suffering of Jerusalem. It is almost entirely a series of laments over what is to come for Jerusalem. This is a model for the modern believer and preacher, who must never rejoice in the sins of others, thinking they are somehow vindicated as righteous because of their neighbor's sins. We do not rejoice that God punished the unrepentant, but lament that they did not repent.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

These two things are worthy of lamentation: the godless behavior of people, and the terrible outcome of such behavior. Jeremiah grieves that the people have embraced lies, and he also grieves for the price they will pay for following their delusions.

PREACHING IDEA

Be ashamed of sin, but proud of God.

PREACHING POINTERS

This passage helps us see that shame and sadness can be the very best thing for us. Jeremiah laments with weeping for his people and the coming judgment. He is not a bystander or guest at the funeral of a distant friend; he is a participant. As he recounts the sins and the judgment, he enters the grief with vivid images that expresses his intense grief.

Hopefully our spontaneous response to sin is sadness; but sad to say, it is not always our first response. We need to choose to be upset about our sin. But it doesn't end there, because if we choose sadness for sin, that is a sign that God is working in us. We make it through these seemingly negative emotions not by running from them but by seeing God's hand at work in

our lives through them. This is an odd thought: we should feel good that we feel sad about our sin, because our God is at work in our lives.

Jeremiah 10:1–25

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The passage mocks idolatry to make the point that no human creation is worthy of worship. Those who do bow to the work of their own hands bring about their own ruin. This is the last passage that alternates between focus on the lies Judah follows and on the disasters their behavior will bring about. It closes with a prayer that ends this section and prepares the reader for the next section: an intense look at Jeremiah's personal pilgrimage before God, with respect to his relationship to the people of Judah.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Everyone must choose between the true God and a man-made lie, and the consequences of that choice are enormous. The Christian too must choose between loyalty to his friends, family, and nation, and his loyalty to God. This is not a matter of becoming aloof and self-righteous, but it is a matter of choosing between following Christ and following the world.

PREACHING IDEA

Don't waste your worship.

PREACHING POINTERS

When Jeremiah describes how an idol is made and then compares that man-made carving to the Creator, the worship of idols becomes ludicrous. However, it is not just ludicrous; it is sinful and dangerous.

When we see pictures of people in tan-colored robes bowing down to a polished gold statue and throwing flowers on it, we have little or no response. It takes us a moment to realize what they are doing. We just don't see that sort of thing. Jeremiah saw it in Judah and was disgusted. But that is just not done in our western world. Thus, we have a great challenge to present this passage to our *idol-free* world. Our bodies may not bow down, but our hearts and minds regularly pay homage to something or someone other than our Lord.

Jeremiah 11:1–23

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This passage examines human depravity as Jeremiah experienced it in the course of his ministry. Israel has always been unfaithful, and now its depravity is such that even Jeremiah's closest kinship group, the people of his hometown, want to kill him for his preaching. For this reason, Jeremiah with God's help will realize that the nation is incorrigible and that time for pleading that God would spare them has passed.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

This passage introduces the reader to the process whereby Jeremiah realized he could no longer intercede for Jerusalem. To understand fully God's justice and mercy, we must first understand human depravity. The horrors that accompanied the fall of Jerusalem were so great that those who honestly consider them must wonder if God was too harsh. But if one with equal honesty considers the moral depths to which the people had fallen, God's response is comprehensible. What then becomes astonishing is the promises of grace that appear later in the book.

PREACHING IDEA

To understand God's goodness, we must look at our wickedness.

PREACHING POINTERS

God's covenant with Israel was clear: worship him only, and do not worship or even make idols. They disobeyed this command almost before it was given, and then continued to disobey this part of the covenant for hundreds of years. The disobedience was so ingrained that they couldn't even hear the command any longer.

While we are not under the same covenant the Jews were under, we still serve the same God, and we still have the same kind of human hearts. Jeremiah's call to Judah and to us is to admit that our hearts are wicked. Though not explicitly stated in this passage, the warning is first to those who *do* listen. To the degree we admit that our hearts are wicked, we will see the goodness of God. The warning is also for those who *do not* listen to him. To the degree they ignore their wicked hearts, they will not see the goodness of God.

Jeremiah 12:1–13:27

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This passage explores two ideas: the gravity of Jerusalem's evil and Jeremiah's awakening to the reality of the people's depravity. It speaks of how Jeremiah tried to intercede for them but got an unexpected response from God—that these people were beyond praying for. Jeremiah had wrongly supposed that only the leaders were bad, but God made him see that the whole nation was corrupt. Two object lessons illustrate this concept, and Jeremiah begins to realize that the people will not repent.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Compassion for sinners is right and good, but it should not blind us to the severity of the corruption around us. We should not make empty excuses for sin, saying that some people are merely misled by a few bad influencers. This is not a call for arrogant judgmentalism, but an appeal for us to not mistake our own hopes for a people, often arising from our love and compassion for them, for the truth about them.

PREACHING IDEA

Keep your balance, while you can.

PREACHING POINTERS

Jeremiah's message is a terrifying warning: Judah will become incorrigible. That is, she will continue in sin to the degree that she cannot stop, and judgment will come. She was at the point of no return and did not know it. When someone is so set in their sinful ways that they won't or can't change, it is called "incorrigible." People today can become incorrigible.

How does the gymnast stay on that four-inch beam? She amazes us as she spins, flips, stands on her hands, and somehow keeps her balance, at least most of time. When she begins to lose her balance, she swings her arms, twists her torso, struggles to regain her balance, and then, unbelievably, stays on the beam. But there is a point when she cannot recover, and gravity takes control. She no longer has a choice; she will fall. In the case of a balance beam, gymnasts know very well when they have lost their balance. Can a person sin so much that he *won't* stop? Then, by continuing in sin, can he come to the point where he *can't* stop? If we are terrified by this possibility, then the message is a blessing because God's Spirit is at work in us. He is calling for repentance. If one is frightened by the warning, they are not incorrigible—yet.

Jeremiah 14:1–15:9

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This text recounts three episodes in which Jeremiah prayed for Jerusalem. In each case, he received a negative response from God. Jerusalem did not fall because Jeremiah failed to pray for them or because he was unworthy; it fell because the people were incorrigibly apostate. This and similar passages exonerate Jeremiah from the charge that the fall of Jerusalem was somehow his fault.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Prayer for sinners is the duty of the servant of God, but this does not mean that the servant can always turn aside God's wrath. Jeremiah, in particular, was a great prophet and as such, his words, so to speak, carried great weight with God. Jeremiah was not allowed to waste or misuse his prophetic authority, asking God for something that God could not grant.

PREACHING IDEA

We don't know who will be saved; all we know is that we should pray.

PREACHING POINTERS

Would that we would be more like Jeremiah. Hmm . . . *should* he be our example? He had to be told to stop praying; in fact, God took time to convince him that he must stop interceding for Judah.

In contrast, we must be convinced to start praying. We hold churchwide prayer events, promote the importance of prayer, and might even provide a meal to bolster attendance. We must be convinced to *start* praying, not to *stop*. In an ironic way, God's word to Jeremiah to not pray becomes our directive to pray. The reason is, we do not have the office of an Old Testament prophet, and God has not revealed to us who will and who will not repent. While God directs Jeremiah to not intercede, the point of this passage is that we should.

Jeremiah 15:10–17:18

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This passage is a decisive turning point in the book. It explores Jeremiah's abandonment of intercession for Judah and his realization that the human heart is incurably evil. As Jeremiah awakens to this reality, he becomes more isolated and frustrated. Still, this text is a vindication of Jeremiah. A complaint against him might be that Jerusalem fell because he was not a great enough prophet to avert disaster. In fact, its destruction was delayed while he prayed for it, and he only stopped because he had to yield to God's demand to stop interceding. He also had to face the facts about the nature of his people. This was not a triumphal moment for Jeremiah; it was the occasion for bitter sorrow.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The message that people are wicked is a hard one, and it is hard on the messenger. Perhaps more clearly than anyone in the Old Testament, Jeremiah looked fully into the corruption of the human heart. Knowing that this was true of the people he loved was especially bitter for him. The doctrine of human depravity should always be a source of grief, and not of smug self-righteousness.

PREACHING IDEA

A hard message is hard on the messenger.

PREACHING POINTERS

This seems like a very negative, downer kind of passage to preach/teach. And it would be, were it not for the promise of redemption, seen briefly in this passage (16:14–15) and reoccurring throughout Scripture.

When we grasp the wickedness of our hearts, we will be reaching for forgiveness and redemption. When the need for forgiveness and redemption is great, so the joy is great when it comes. If we only needed a little help with our hearts, then there would be little joy. It is well worth the pain of admitting that my heart is wicked in order to experience the joy of forgiveness and redemption that comes through the cross. This passage presents an insurmountable problem, with the rest of Scripture providing the solution.

Jeremiah 17:19–18:23

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Judah's refusal to keep the Sabbath led to greater sins, which led to God's warning of judgment and Jeremiah's harsh imprecatory prayer. This passage includes summaries of two of Jeremiah's great sermons: the one delivered at the People's Gate, and the other at a potter's house. The sermons explore the progress of the people's apostasy and the inevitable outcome. These messages appear to have come from early in Jeremiah's ministry and illustrate how he began to realize that the people would not repent. The imprecatory prayer may come from later in his ministry, but indicates how fully he recognized that the people would not change.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Refusal to repent over little sins will lead to greater sins, which in turn will lead to facing the full fury of God. But Jeremiah realized that his people could not even do a relatively small thing, such as stop working on the Sabbath. Eventually, he saw that their wickedness had become full, and he voiced an especially severe imprecatory prayer against them. The task of a great prophet is to intercede for sinners and avert their destruction, as Moses did in the golden calf incident of Exodus 32. But sometimes this is not possible. Jeremiah did not fail, but his experience was not a happy one.

PREACHING IDEA

Simple obedience guards against severe disobedience.

PREACHING POINTERS

The idea of this passage could be dismissed as just being a description of a slippery slope.¹ But that is not what God is saying in this passage. Rather, it is a cause/effect. Jeremiah's two sermons can be summarized: if you sin in everyday simple matters, such as breaking the Sabbath, it will lead to greater sins, such as calling God's will meaningless, rejecting his authority, and calling sin orthodoxy.

While the slippery slope does not carry weight in a formal argument, the slippery slope of sin will carry one into deeper sin. We must remember we are not dealing with logic; we are dealing with the human heart, which is desperately wicked. Jeremiah's imprecation (18:19–23) is not explicitly stated in the preaching idea; however, the concept of *severe disobedience* implies God's wrath.

Jeremiah 19:1–20:18

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Jeremiah pronounced a final condemnation against his people, but was profoundly dismayed at how his life and ministry turned out. He gave a scathing condemnation of the city at the Potsherd Gate, and he cursed an apostate temple official named Pashhur. But he was so dismayed at what he had to do that he also cursed the day he was born—an expression of how thoroughly he hated that he should be put in this role.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

A people can become so stubborn in their sin that there is nothing left for a minister to do but pronounce judgment, but for someone who desires to reach people for God there is no more bitter task than this. The preacher's heart will be broken by the incomprehensible, irrational evil of his people, and also by the necessity that he must curse and condemn them.

¹ When trying to win an argument some will cite one bad event and say that we must stop this because it leads to something worse. In a general sense it says that because *A* happened eventually *Z* will happen. It is known as logical fallacy sometimes called the slippery slope.

PREACHING IDEA

There are times when it is bitter to talk about getting better.

PREACHING POINTERS

What Jeremiah did and where he did it are both part of his message. The place was the valley of Hinnom, where infants were sacrificed, which is the reason the nation would be shattered like a flask. Then, the personal opposition from Pashhur could have easily prompted him to deliver this message with an arrogance of self-authority, thinking, “Well, I guess I told them.” But Jeremiah responds with such sorrow and grief for his nation that he cursed the day he was born.

No one likes to preach or teach about hell. But we must. This passage shows us that Jeremiah struggled with preaching about God’s wrath that was coming on Judah. From his struggle we can find comfort in knowing that it is good to struggle when preaching/teaching about the coming judgment of hell. Of course, we have the luxury of preaching the good news, but we must remember that the good news starts with the bad news. If anyone will desire to be made better by God’s gracious work, then the bitter portion of the gospel must be proclaimed first.

Jeremiah 21:1–23:40

EXEGETICAL IDEA

A request from Zedekiah for a favorable oracle from God leads to a lengthy recital of the messages God has sent against the house of David, along with a condemnation of the false prophets. It is likely that Zedekiah had hoped that Jeremiah could provide a miraculous deliverance from the Babylonians, such as had happened in the reign of Hezekiah when the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem. To this, Jeremiah responds that the whole dynasty of David—from Zedekiah back through the reigns of Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim, and Jehoahaz—had become so corrupt that no such salvation was possible.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

If we have a history of refusing to heed the messages of warning that God has sent us, we cannot expect him to give us a message of hope. God will not extend mercy to those whose habitual apostasy and corruption has reached the maximum. The leadership of the nation, both secular and religious, bears special guilt in this regard.

PREACHING IDEA

Ask God for victory (intervention), but don’t violate his authority.

PREACHING POINTERS

It is wrong to expect God to intervene for us and affirm our work when we are violating his word and worshipping other gods. Some need arises in our life, so we ask him for a victory over the problem, but what is more needed is victory over our disobedient lives and hearts. Of course, we need to ask God for victory in our lives, while being careful not to violate his authority

Jeremiah 24:1–25:38

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God promises to preserve his people and his word in spite of the coming destruction of Judah's leadership and the promise of judgment against all nations. Jeremiah receives a message concerning good figs and bad figs, representing respectively those who will preserve Israel's heritage and create Judaism (the Babylonian exiles) and those who will be entirely destroyed (the people in Jerusalem). And although calamity and exile is certain, it will have an end, after seventy years.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God's destruction of human structures and plans does not destroy his purposes or his word. God's people can become so corrupt that harsh judgment is inescapable, but God's purposes do not fail.

PREACHING IDEA

What basket do you want to be in?

PREACHING POINTERS

God gives us a choice. To use Jeremiah's image, do we choose a basket of fresh fruit or a basket of rotten fruit? Do we choose a rotten life or a good one? The choice for a good life is to submit to God's discipline and obey his clear commands.

Jeremiah 26:1–29:32

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This passage explores how the most severe opposition to Jeremiah came from Judah's religious elite, the priestly officials of the temple and the popular (but false) prophets. This text demonstrates the severity of the hostility of the religious establishment toward Jeremiah. They almost killed him when he preached his great temple sermon, and they did kill another true prophet, Uriah of Kiriath-jearim. By contrast, two false prophets, Hananiah and Shemaiah, were well received as they mocked and opposed Jeremiah.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

When God's plan includes destroying an old but false tradition, many people will vigorously oppose the change. Apostate ideas create a pseudo-orthodoxy that people will fanatically and violently defend. The great tragedy is that such people believe they are defending the truth. The warning for us is to not confuse our theology with the word of God.

PREACHING IDEA

God, you haven't done it that way before.

PREACHING POINTERS

When speaking the above phrase, the intonations reveal the attitude toward God and what he is doing. The person who doesn't like or want any change is enraged when something

new comes along, even if that new something is clearly God's hand. In contrast, the person who trusts and submits to God will be encouraged when God is bringing about something new. It is pivotal that the new idea or plan is from God, for just being new does not make it of God. But when God is making changes, we not only need to accept those changes; we need to embrace them and anticipate God's good hand.

Jeremiah 30:1–31:26

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God will call Israel back to himself after their punishment, they will repent, and then God will fully restore them. This text is a series of messages that all seem to have come to Jeremiah in a prophetic dream. Israel will be healed of the grievous wounds it has suffered, will be brought back to YHWH and the land, and will stop wandering in search of salvation among foreign gods and foreign powers.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

After repentance comes the joys of restoration. Israel, the chosen of God, had to experience severe pain as part of the process of its salvation and purification. We who are grafted into Israel and who have our own guilt to contend with should not suppose that our experience will be different.

PREACHING IDEA

Come home to our accepting, restorative God.

PREACHING POINTERS

Why do we hesitate to go to someone to restore a relationship? Simply put: fear. We don't know how they will respond. God made it clear to Israel, and to us, when our sin breaks the relationship with him; he wants us to know what it is like to return to him. It is a pleasant dream.

Jeremiah 31:27–40

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God will give Israel the new covenant to replace the Sinai covenant, in order to correct the failings of the latter. The Sinai covenant depended on Israel's ability to faithfully perform "all the words of this law that are written in this book" (Deut. 28:58). The new covenant depends on the faithfulness and compassion of God alone, as well as on his determination to bring about salvation for all true Israel. The people will acknowledge their guilt, but it will be removed from them. And unlike Sinai, the new covenant will never be terminated.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The new covenant is given to the "house of Israel and the house of Judah." But because even we Gentiles are now grafted into Israel, it belongs to all God's people, and all can celebrate this ongoing great work of God. God did not abandon Israel to destruction, and in like manner he has not abandoned the nations.

PREACHING IDEA

Come, join the celebration!

PREACHING POINTERS

The New Testament is very clear that believers in Jesus are included in the new covenant; thus, it has been inaugurated. And there is still more of the new covenant to be experienced in the future. In the past, Israel could have celebrated what God would do in the future. Today, believers celebrate what God has already started. And in the future, all will celebrate what God will have finished.

Jeremiah 32:1–44

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Jeremiah purchases a piece of land, and this becomes a prophetic sign for the coming redemption of Israel. It implies that the land, which will be burnt over and trampled by foreign armies, will again belong to Israel and be fruitful.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

When things seem hopeless, a simple act can demonstrate faith that God still has a future for us. But this is not a matter of optimism, of merely hoping for the best in the face of severe danger. For Jeremiah's generation, the worst possible outcome does in fact happen. But God, who raises the dead, can bring about an astonishing and seemingly impossible reversal of the judgment.

PREACHING IDEA

Hope in God's future; nothing is impossible for him.

PREACHING POINTERS

When buying a house, we put great trust in the real estate agent. Is this a good price? Is it a wise investment? When Jeremiah was purchasing property, he had only one question. "Why should I buy a piece of land when the nation is about to be destroyed?" The answer was direct: because God told him to. This was a living illustration. What would Zedekiah and Judah think of this? It didn't make sense on the surface, so it demanded deeper thinking. Perhaps some of them would discover the deeper meaning that nothing was impossible for God. Though destruction was imminent, he still had a good future for Israel.

There are so many different stories of hopelessness in our congregations. God knows that often it is hard for us to believe that his future for us is good, so he employs a method of communication that helps us truly believe this. He tells a story and wants us to discover the meaning. When we discover a meaning or draw a conclusion, we are much more likely to believe it. Jeremiah buys land, which was investing in the future when there doesn't seem to be a future. God still has a good future for us.

Jeremiah 33:1–26

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The desolate city will be restored and have a glory that surpasses anything in its past. This magnificent future that God is preparing centers on the Davidic Messiah. The historical house of David, now broken and cast down into the dust, has an enduring, eschatological future in a great act of God.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

With the death of Zedekiah, the historical Davidic dynasty came to an end. As a human institution, it never has and never will return. But God's promises are more enduring than any crisis in any historical context. A new Davidic king will give his people a kingdom not of this world.

PREACHING IDEA

You can't beat God's promises.

PREACHING POINTERS

"Call to Me, and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know" (33:3 NASB). This often-quoted verse has a deeper meaning when "mighty" is more correctly translated "unassailable." As Jeremiah describes the coming events of Jerusalem being gloriously restored and even a Davidic king to rule, it must have been hard for the Jews to believe. Their own lack of trust in God's power was an affront to, or attack on, the promise.

The focus of the text is God's amazing promises to Israel and to us. The correct understanding of the opening metaphor (vv. 2–3) of a fortress leads us to the awareness that though God's promises are wonderful and beyond our imaginations, they still come under attack. Opposition comes from the forces of evil, but also from our own hearts. These promises become even more real if we will acknowledge that our lack of faith in God will, in a sense, attack them. We must come to the point of surrendering our doubts and embracing belief in these glorious promises that God makes.

Jeremiah 34:1–35:19

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The passage contrasts and explores the gross disobedience of the leaders of Jerusalem, who quickly broke a newly made covenant with YHWH, with the fidelity of the Rechabites, who zealously kept their ancestral traditions. Taken together, the two chapters contrast the behavior of the two groups and demonstrate how dishonest and faithless the leaders of Jerusalem had become, a matter already explored earlier in the book. These texts also illustrate how the structure of the book is more concerned with thematic continuity than with chronological sequence. The episode of chapter 35 took place more than a decade before the events of chapter 34.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

An example of simple faithfulness puts to shame the extravagant but hollow pretense of those who merely claim to be God's people. The pretense of obedience acted out by the Jerusalem nobility was impulsive and ephemeral. The determined fidelity of the Rechabites was a matter of consistent habit and deep commitment. Zedekiah and those around him had forgotten what it meant to place honor and integrity above convenience.

PREACHING IDEA

Don't go for a good deal; go for a good life.

PREACHING POINTERS

These two chapters are narratives; thus, the telling of the stories is of high importance. To make his point, Jeremiah employs a universal structure of the bad compared to the good. Zedekiah appears to be obedient, but in the end we see that he is just trying to make a deal with God. In contrast, the Rechabites are simply living out a lifestyle of a submissive heart.

Our culture is filled with a desire to make a good deal. The best deal is the win-win scenario, where both parties end up getting what they lack or need. When we try to make a deal with God, we forget that he has already won. There is nothing we have that he needs or lacks. He does, however, want our lifestyle to be one of submissive obedience.

Jeremiah 36:1–32

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The incident described here, in which Jehoiakim destroyed a scroll containing an oracular message from Jeremiah, demonstrates how bitterly and completely the royal house and the aristocracy were opposed to the word of God. As described in the introduction, it also tells us how what originally was a loose collection of sermon transcripts and letters from Jeremiah began to take shape as the book of Jeremiah. It, like Jeremiah's realization that he could no longer intercede for the people, is a decisive moment in the prophet's story.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

A decisive rejection of the word of God leads to decisive ruin. Also, attempts to eradicate the word of God inevitably fail. Through his blasphemous actions, Jehoiakim showed himself to be one of the great reprobates of the Bible. When Josiah heard the Law read aloud, he tore his garments in grief and repentance. When his son Jehoiakim heard the scroll of Jeremiah read aloud, he tore up the scroll and burned it.

PREACHING IDEA

Rejection of the written Word of God is a rejection of God and leads to ruin.

PREACHING POINTERS

Baruch was to write down all the words that God gave to Jeremiah. This was no simple task; it must have taken weeks, perhaps months of work. Thus, the written copy is a very valuable and

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costly item. When Jehoiakim burns the scroll, it was not like the modern burning of a single copy of a book that has thousands of copies still usable. This was the only copy. Jehoiakim's rejection of God's message cannot be missed or overstated; it was as if he was trying to erase the words that had been spoken.

This story is presented in such a way as to show that Baruch's written copy of God's words to Jeremiah is equal in authority to the spoken words of Jeremiah. To reject the written words is to reject the spoken words. Of course, the application of those words in the church today will vary from the direct application for the ancient Jews. The thrust is that God's written Word is the same as his spoken words.

Jeremiah 37:1–39:18

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This is a tightly bound, coherent text that focuses on the differing attitudes of the nobility, Zedekiah, and Ebed-melek toward Jeremiah. The passage centers on three messages given to Zedekiah, who is not utterly wicked but is weak and yields to pressure from the nobility to silence Jeremiah. This contrasts with the faith and integrity of Ebed-melek the Cushite, who saves Jeremiah from a wretched death. In the end, it is the Babylonians who save Jeremiah from the brutal treatment he has gotten from his own countrymen and who release him after capturing the city.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

In times of crisis and polarization, some will love and some will hate those who bear God's Word, while others will yield to social pressure to join in the hostility. In this passage, the foreigners recognize the authority of Jeremiah while the Jerusalem aristocracy despises him.

PREACHING IDEA

Choose to respect, then expect to be blessed.

PREACHING POINTERS

The passage presents the hostility of the Jewish leaders toward Jeremiah, the fluctuation of Zedekiah and the respect that comes from Ebed-melek. It begins with the prophecy of condemnation to Zedekiah and his rejection of Jeremiah. The height of the hostility toward Jeremiah comes when he is thrown into the cistern. The passage ends with Ebed-melek and the affirming prophecy given to him.

This is a tricky passage because the thrust is about attitudes toward us who are preachers and teachers. Complicating this is the difficult structure. These must not hinder the proclamation of truth. The passage presents the hostility of the Jewish leaders toward Jeremiah, the fluctuation of Zedekiah, and the respect that comes from Ebed-melek. This gives us clear examples of what our attitudes toward those who proclaim the message of God could be. This passage not only teaches that we should give respect, but that when we do we are blessed just as Ebed-melek was.

Jeremiah 40:1–41:18

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The violent zealotry and ambition of one man, Ishmael son of Nethaniah, destroyed the possibility of a peaceful and prosperous Jewish community continuing in the land. Although the sin was not God's doing, it fulfilled his purpose of sending all the Jews into exile, obliterating any Jewish state in the former Judah. The story also reveals the moral chaos of the exilic Jerusalem community. It was a place where, even in the midst of the calamity of the fall of the city, people could behave with a complete lack of moral principles. The most dangerous thing one could do was trust another man and take his words at face value.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God uses even human evil to fulfill his purposes. For God's redemptive purposes to be fulfilled, all that remained of preexilic Judah had to be swept away. Indeed, chapter 44 reveals that many of the Jews still in the land at the time of Gedaliah's murder were deeply committed to paganism. When the postexilic Jews returned from Babylon, they would start the community again with a clean slate.

PREACHING IDEA

When you can't stop crying, don't stop trusting in God.

PREACHING POINTERS

This narrative follows the tragic fall of Jerusalem and the horrific end of Zedekiah's life. The beginning of this story gives us a hint that things might get better, that Judah will survive even though dominated by Babylon. Signs of prosperity begin to grow under Gedaliah's leadership, but this ends with his murder. Since he was appointed by Babylon, the Jews expect even greater destruction because of Nebuchadnezzar's wrath. What little hope they had is gone. Judah is completely destroyed. Nothing is left in the Promised Land. Even in this continuing desolation, Jeremiah was calling Judah to trust YHWH.

It is not wrong to hope for better times, nor even to ask God to bring those times about. Often, he does. But what about when the cancer comes back, when the children and parents are not reconciled, when the addiction becomes a lifestyle, when the pain doesn't go away? Sometimes eyes full of tears can best focus on the true object of our faith: a loving sovereign Lord.

Jeremiah 42:1–43:7

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Jews, in a panic over whether the Babylonians would come down upon them in severe reprisal for the murder of Gedaliah (whom Babylon had appointed as governor), asked Jeremiah to seek God's direction over whether they should flee the land and head into Egypt. They assured him they would do whatever God directed. When told to stay in the land, they immediately and angrily rejected the directive and ran for the Egyptian border. The survivors in exilic Judah thus proved to be as unreliable about their willingness to obey God as they had been before the Babylonian conquest.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The obstinacy of people demonstrates that God's punishment is just. God's promise that the people would be safe if they stayed in the land was genuine, but in the larger theology of the book, the episode illustrates how obstinate the people were, and it shows that the exile had to be total for it to be effective.

PREACHING IDEA

If you ask God for help, accept his answer.

PREACHING POINTERS

It seemed logical that the Babylonians would severely punish Judah for killing Gedaliah. Therefore, the best course would be to flee. It would seem that the circumstances God allowed led in that direction. However, God did not send these Jews to Egypt, where they would suffer and die. Rather, they chose to reject God's offer of life.

To this day, people reject God's offer. Our attitude toward those who reject God's offer must not be that they are the enemy, nor should we look down on them in pity; rather, we should patiently proclaim God's offer of life. This rejection should also be a warning to us. While our acceptance of his gift of life through Jesus gives us a secure eternal relationship with him, it does not mean that we won't reject his expectations of us. Our disobedience does not take away the gift, but it does bring his discipline.

Jeremiah 43:8–44:30

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God has repudiated the Jews who fled to Egypt: they are still under judgment, they will not create or sustain orthodox Judaism, and they will not flourish. This text condemns the exiles in Egypt in two phases. First, Jeremiah warns them that they cannot escape God's judgment by running to Egypt. Second, his confrontation with the people demonstrated that they were still devoted to pagan deities, and especially to the "Queen of Heaven."

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Those who flee, unrepentant, from God's judgment remain permanently under it. We cannot escape guilt and God's wrath by moving to a different place. And a change of location will do nothing to change our hearts. The Jews in Egypt remained as passionately devoted to the Queen of Heaven as they had been before, and they even blamed the fall of Jerusalem on a failure to honor her. This text also demonstrates that the future of the Jews lay with the Babylonian community and not with the survivors in Jerusalem (24:1–10).

PREACHING IDEA

Move beyond insecurity; trust God, the only true security.

PREACHING POINTERS

God's messages to Judah, through Jeremiah, continued even though they had exiled themselves to Egypt. This shows God's continuing grace. Judah went beyond rejecting his warning.

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They had to take great initiative and effort to disobey him; it was no small task to move the remaining nation to Egypt. And in Egypt, they bowed down to the Queen of Heaven. Even so, God continued to speak. Perhaps Judah finally believed that Jeremiah's words were true when they saw the armies of Babylon invading Egypt.

This pericope has a two-part application. The first part is a theme common throughout Scripture, which Augustine wonderfully articulated years ago and has been repeated numerous times: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." The Jews were seeking safety and rest by depending upon Egypt instead of YHWH. The second application is a built-in consequence for a misplaced source of security. If our security lies in anything or anyone other than God it is sure that, one day, it will fail. The only way to get beyond insecurities is to look to God for security, and to rest in him.

Jeremiah 45:1–5

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This event took place in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, long before the events narrated in chapter 44. It illustrates again that the book is organized thematically and not chronologically. This comes at the end of a series of texts dealing with the trials of Jeremiah's prophetic career, and it makes the point that those who align themselves with the truth will suffer along with the heroes of the faith. Baruch was distressed over how his association with Jeremiah was costing him everything; but through Jeremiah, God reminded him that soon there would be nothing worth having in Jerusalem. Baruch's loss of prestige and outward success would matter little when the city was in flames.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Serving God in times of crisis requires focus and commitment, even on the part of those who are in a subordinate role. God rebukes Baruch for his desire to hold on to the outward trappings of success, but he also reassures him. When all of Judah was a ruin, God would still preserve the faithful scribe.

PREACHING IDEA

Recognize God's future work, not your past accomplishments.

PREACHING POINTERS

God's message to Baruch was twofold. God's word directed him in what he should not do, and then in what God would do for him. Often a command to not do something is followed by a positive command of what to do. This is different. God says to Baruch, and to us, "Don't seek recognition for what you have done; recognize what I will do."

One might think that the negative command to not seek great things for yourself would be followed by the positive command to seek great things for God. Perhaps we seek great things for ourselves because we think that by focusing on our great accomplishments of the past, we can somehow ensure a great future. But instead, God follows with a command to trust him with the future.

Jeremiah 46:1–49:39

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Each oracle represents some aspect of God's judgment against the nations. All the oracles have three things in common. First, each state, like Judah, faces God's judgment and is destined for defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. Second, each state, unlike Judah, has no hope for a future restoration. Third, Jeremiah does not engage in triumphalist gloating over the fall of the Gentile states. He views the death and destruction that will befall them as tragic and lamentable. Beyond that, each oracle has its own characteristics, as explored below.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Like Israel, the other nations of the world will be judged, and it will happen in accordance with the principles found in these oracles. Amos 3:2 says, "You alone have I known from all the families of the earth; for that reason, I will punish you for all your iniquities." It is not that Israel alone was judged, and it is not that being the chosen people confers immunity from punishment. But if judgment starts at the house of God, it will surely reach all people.

PREACHING IDEA

Your arm is too short to box with God.

PREACHING POINTERS

Without God's judgments, his grace and mercy are not needed. This passage helps us see that he is a God who judges. He judges not only his chosen people, his family, but he judges all. He gives us clear pictures of what and how he judges. From these nine judgments on the nations we can see some universal characteristics of his judgment that apply to us.

God's judgment will come someday, but it will come—and it won't leave any sin unpunished. And in the fuller revelation: God is merciful in his judgment, because through Christ's amazing work we can receive mercy.

Jeremiah 50:1–51:64

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Babylon, the enemy of God and his people, will be annihilated. The text is in two parts, with the first and very lengthy portion being a prediction that Babylon will fall and be swallowed by the sands of the desert, but that the Jews will endure. The second is a brief account of the mission of Seraiah, Baruch's brother, to deliver a symbolic act predicting Babylon's demise.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The depiction of the destruction of Babylon concerns the end of Babylon's historical dominion but also represents the complete demise of imperial power that sets itself against the kingdom of God. Babylon, from the building of the tower in Genesis 11 to the demise of the great harlot in Revelation 18, has always been always representative of the ideal of the power, wealth, and ideological dominance of the human kingdom over against the kingdom of God. The fall of historical Babylon is a sign that the ideal Babylon represents will fall before Jesus and his kingdom.

PREACHING IDEA

Don't take part in what God is against.

PREACHING POINTERS

Apparently, these prophecies against Babylon were presented to the Babylonians. That would be one tough preaching assignment. But interspersed in the judgment of Babylon are directives and affirmations to Israel. This message is not just to announce judgment on Babylon, but to give guidance to Israel and to us.

God knows that the Jews of that era and his children of today live in the midst of nations which are guilty of systemic and cultural sins. So what are we to do? God made it clear that the Jews were not to stay in Babylon any longer than they had to. He warned them not to see themselves as a permanent part of that nation. No matter the nation in which we live, all are affected by evil. Thus, we must not see any nation as the basis for our true identity. While we are to be good citizens of the physical nation in which we live, we must remember that this is not our permanent residence. We must evaluate what is around us and be careful to not be for, let alone take part in, what God is against.

Jeremiah 52:1–34

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Jeremiah 52 vindicates the prophet; all his dire predictions came true. The chapter, much of it almost a word-for-word repeat of 2 Kings 24:18–25:30, describes Zedekiah's wretched fate, Jerusalem's fall, the fate of the captives, and the final gift of a bit of dignity to the aged and hapless Jehoiachin. In 2 Kings, the text narrates the sad end of the Davidic kingdom. Although it does that here too, the implied lesson is the vindication of Jeremiah's status as the true prophet of God.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

People may despise the word of God, but in the end it will be proven true. The lies by which the people lived, and which Jeremiah explores so thoroughly in the beginning of the book, inevitably brought about their ruin. All those who called him a traitor and even a blasphemer were proven wrong by the hard facts of history. Jeremiah is vindicated.

PREACHING IDEA

God tells us so.

PREACHING POINTERS

We hear again the events of Zedekiah's terrible end, the temple being burned, and the nation taken into exile. Why did God end with this summary of how his judgments of sin came to pass? Does he want to berate Israel? He does not need to build up his self-image by saying, "I told you so."

This summary reinforces that we can trust what he says. And what he says is very simple: disobey and face judgment; obey and enjoy his blessings. It really is that simple. As a reminder,

Overview of All Preaching Passages

our obedience does not earn God's blessings. Our obedience puts us into a position to receive and enjoy those blessings, and our disobedience separates us from them.

Lamentations 1:1–22

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The passage explores the suffering of Jerusalem under the personification of the city as a woman. The poem is divided between the parts where Jerusalem herself is the speaker and those where the poet is the speaker. The personification is meant to provoke compassion and sorrow in the reader: a beautiful mother has been ravished and laid low.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Jerusalem the beautiful city of God is fallen and destitute. Although the text does not deny her guilt, it focuses on her suffering. When a society is brought down by sin and folly, much that is beautiful is destroyed alongside the ugly. Divine wrath is just, but it is still horrible.

PREACHING IDEA

We are invited to feel the hurt.

PREACHING POINTERS

The application of this book and this first lament will stretch most pastor/teachers. The image of a widow weeping was more intense in the ancient world because much of a family's welfare was dependent upon the husband. But even with the cultural difference the feelings of pain and grief still come through. At the funeral service for a faithful husband the feelings of grief are intensified when the widow is seated.

The poet is inviting us to share Israel's pain for her sins. We are not to stand on the sidelines and say "poor Israel." Rather we, by way of the genre of poetry, are invited to feel the pain with Israel. God, through this text, is asking us to feel something, and to let the feeling become a part of how we feel about the consequences of all sin—our sins and those of others.

Lamentations 2:1–22

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This poem approaches Jerusalem's calamity from a prophetic perspective, describing all that happened as the work of God. Although guilt and punishment are part of this, the focus is on God's control of events. One cannot complain to God while denying that he is the sovereign over all that happens in the world. This focus allows the poem to move toward prayer and intercession after the lament, since God remains sovereign over all things. He who struck Israel is the only one who can save Israel.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The reader should understand that Jerusalem's fall did not come about simply because of poor leadership in Judah or aggressive enemies in Babylon. These things, too, were orchestrated by God (not in a deterministic sense, but as a response to Israelite apostasy). Appreciating

Overview of All Preaching Passages

divine rule over all things, the readers can respond with a prayer for mercy, knowing that divine sovereignty does not contradict the need for prayer.

PREACHING IDEA

When the pain comes in, the cry should go up.

PREACHING POINTERS

There is no wondering about the source of Israel's pain. Clearly God is the one bringing disaster upon his people. God seems to be the enemy because the destruction is so severe. But the object of the lament is equally clear. God is the one to whom the people cry.

When we are in pain, no matter the cause or the reason, we cry out in some way. Perhaps it is a literal cry or silent cry within our minds and spirits. The passage does not explain why God allows or causes pain, but it does direct us to cry out to him. Crying out to him doesn't mean that the pain will go away. But when we cry out to him, it brings purpose and significance to our cries because he is the one who has a reason and a purpose, and we can trust him.

Lamentations 3:1–66

EXEGETICAL IDEA

One single man serves as the voice of the people, and he is a paradigm of both suffering and faith. He laments over the city, expresses his extreme pain, declares his unwavering faith in God, appeals to the people to repent and pray, and himself prays in hope that God will set all things right. He is the ideal of how the devout should respond to the calamity.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The singular man of Lamentations 3 takes on the role of the suffering servant of YHWH. In this, he is a model for all readers, in that he maintains his righteousness and devotion to God while he suffers terribly and is fully aware of how badly the people have sinned. The ideal is especially fulfilled in Jesus, but all who belong to God should imitate the model set forth in this text.

PREACHING IDEA

Embrace (accept) the suffering and the Savior.

PREACHING POINTERS

This longest of the laments is like a solo sung by a righteous man who sings while Jerusalem crumbles around him. His song doesn't gloss over his suffering; in fact, he describes it with vivid and powerful images such as teeth grinding on gravel and tears flowing like a river. But his song also has the delightful expression of God's faithfulness in 3:22–23, which is made all the more precious when we see it in light of the suffering that is expressed in this lament and in the context of the other four laments. And while it gives us hope in suffering, that is not all that God wants us to know and do when we are suffering. This lament guides us through suffering to embrace the suffering, but more importantly to embrace the Savior.

Lamentations 4:1–22

EXEGETICAL IDEA

This text is an unflinching presentation of the suffering, terror, and tragedy of Jerusalem's conquest and captivity. We must see the horrors of Jerusalem's fall for what they are, and not turn our heads and move on, simply saying that the people got the punishment they deserved. Although most of us are Gentile Christians, we read this as people who have been adopted into Israel and participate in both its promises and its tragedies.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The suffering of Jerusalem and the Jews for their apostasy is unspeakable, and yet must be spoken. We must not preach over this event coldly and clinically, and certainly not judgmentally, as though it had nothing to do with us. The poem calls on us to participate in their grief just as we would grieve some terrible shame and calamity that befell our great-grandparents.

PREACHING IDEA

Really? Sin can do that?

PREACHING POINTERS

This chapter contains some of the most horrifying images in the Bible, that of cannibalism. But the degradation plummets to depths that become unbelievably despicable: mothers boiling their children. In this lament the terrifying high cost of sin is graphically described.

The illustration of a frog in the pot of water over a flame which is gradually heated is often used to explain that little sins, uncorrected, can lead to a disaster, without the person even noticing that things are progressively getting worse. This chapter shatters the pot and lets the full heat of the results of sin come all at once. The horrific result of sin described in this passage should shock us and compel us to full obedience toward God, and to hold spiritual leaders accountable to do the same.

Lamentations 5:1–22

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The poem is entirely a prayer, and it appeals to God to end the Jewish suffering. The interpreter must not emphasize ideas that are only slightly present, if present at all. The poem accurately reflects the grief and bewilderment of the Jewish people, but it says little about the apostasy that brought the disaster upon them. One should read the prayer sympathetically but not deny that something is missing in the prayer.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The Jews will continue to suffer abuse until the great day of their redemption occurs. This is not an occasion for triumphalist boasting against the Jews. It is a sad recognition, in the spirit of Romans 9–11, that Israel's travail will continue until they look upon him whom they have pierced (Zech. 12:10).

PREACHING IDEA

When we suffer because of sin, seek God more than the end of the suffering.

PREACHING POINTERS

“Lord, remember” and “Lord, restore”—these are the two prayers of this closing lament. In between these two short prayers is the description of Israel’s sufferings and their confessions of the sin that led to the suffering. Israel cries out to God for help, and she cries out to God in confession.

The ending of this book of painful experiences is not what most of us would write. When we are hurting, our loudest cry is for the pain to stop. To be sure, there is physical pain that is so intense that every part of our being—mental, spiritual, and physical—will do everything to end the pain. But when there is pain that comes from God’s hand due to sin, our cry should not be “Lord, stop the pain.” It should be “Lord, restore me . . . to you.”