

# TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

by Ray C. Stedman

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In these studies in the book of Jeremiah we have been watching the death of a nation. The kingdom of Judah slowly has been falling apart under the infection of evil which had spread across the face of this land, from the king down to the common people. It has been heading toward the inevitable climax of the judgment of God -- the invasion of the nation and the overthrow of the kingdom. This did not come about suddenly. Jeremiah's ministry lasted for over forty years, and God's patience waited throughout that time for any even last-ditch repentance. But the nation persisted in its evil, and eventually the judgment came as the prophet had predicted. Meanwhile, we have been watching God toughening his prophet, preparing him for the increasing deterioration of this nation. Things were getting worse and worse, despite the warnings and the preaching of this faithful man of God.

In many ways we are facing the parallel of this in our day. As you know, we are facing continually worsening times. The primary message, then, of this book is how to face an increasingly cruel and tough world. Nothing will speak to our hearts more relevantly than this book of Jeremiah. From that ancient day to this we find the need for learning how to face stress and difficult circumstances, and the increase of evil, and to do it with equanimity, with serenity, and with power.

The passage we come to now is in many ways the heart of this prophecy -- Chapters 16 and 17. These two messages, along with those in the two chapters which follow, were delivered toward the close of the reign of Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin was another of the sons of Josiah, and succeeded his brother Jehoahaz to the throne after Jehoahaz had reigned but three months before being deposed by the king of Egypt. Jehoachin reigned for eleven years, and it was during this time that Jeremiah uttered these prophecies.

The section opens with another of the announcements of God's determination to judge this wicked nation. We won't spend much time with it, but I do want to run through it briefly with you because it sets the stage for the remarkable words which God taught Jeremiah in Chapter 17. This opening chapter shows Jeremiah sent again to the people by the Lord. But the first note of his message is one of stringent limitation laid upon the prophet himself. That is, God forbade him to do three specific things. First, he forbade him to get married, as the opening words tell us:

**The word of the Lord came to me: "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place." {Jer 16:1-2 RSV}**

All through this strange book we have been watching God do things which puzzled and bewildered this prophet. It was not easy for him to be a prophet of God. He did not understand what God was doing. Things he was hoping would happen in the nation were not happening. He did not enjoy the experience of prophets before him, of seeing the word of God hit with such intensity and power that people were shaken and turned to the Lord, to Jehovah. His experience was one of seeing the Word seemingly fall on deaf ears, and he was hurt by this. As we have seen in previous studies, he wept before God, struggled with him, cried out to him, pleaded with him. He was shaken to the core. He rebelled and turned aside, tried to stop preaching for a while (we will see more of that next week), but he could not stop.

And now, already a lonely, suffering man, God lays upon him this additional restriction: he is never to know the joys of a home or children, or the comfort and companionship of a wife. The reason for this is not that God was trying to be hard on Jeremiah. In fact, if you read on just a verse or two you find that it was God's love which prompted him to do this to Jeremiah. He was sparing this prophet greater sorrow.

**"For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bore them and the fathers who begot them in this land: They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and**

**by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth." {Jer 16:3-4 RSV}**

It was to spare Jeremiah this additional grief that God forbade him to be married. This reminds you, does it not, of that word of Paul's in First Corinthians 7, where he says something similar: "Now concerning the unmarried, ... in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is," {1 Cor 7:25, 26 RSV}. So God is saying to Jeremiah, "This is a time when these normal aspects of life need to be laid aside. The nation is hastening to its judgment -- the hour is approaching, crisis is coming -- and for that reason do not encumber yourself with burdens unnecessary to bear." Then God laid two other restrictions on the prophet. Verse 5:

**"For thus says the Lord: Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament, or bemoan them; for I have taken away my peace from this people, says the Lord, my steadfast love and mercy." {Jer 16:5 RSV}**

And in Verses 8 and 9:

**"You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will make to cease from this place, before your eyes and in your days, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride." {Jer 16:8-9 RSV}**

That is, "There is no time left for the social amenities, no time for partying or playing games, or even for some of the usual aspects of life, for time is ripening for judgment, and the end is near." Then, to make it worse, God told Jeremiah, "When you go to this people and announce these words, they will greet them with unbelieving surprise, with surprised bewilderment. They will be absolutely appalled at what you say." Verse 10:

**"And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, 'Why has the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?'..." {Jer 16:10 RSV}**

Doctors say that cancer, in its terminal stage, often has a strange way of suddenly seeming to disappear. Many people have been fooled by this. I have known a number of Christians who thought God had healed them when they encountered this strange phenomenon. But it only marked the certainty of the end. And here is a nation which is unaware of its evil. It has reached such a degree of sickness that it is no longer aware there is anything wrong at all. And when that happens, it is a sign that the end of the nation is near.

**"then you shall say to them: 'Because your fathers have forsaken me, says the Lord, and have gone after other gods and served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law, ...'" {Jer 16:11 RSV}**

"You are acting the way you do because you were taught this way. The previous generation had forsaken me," he said. Now, God does not blame them for that. He simply recognizes that this was the case. They had learned from their parents wrong ways and wrong attitudes. But,

**"... 'you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me;' ..." {Jer 16:12b RSV}**

That was the responsibility they bore for their own judgment -- a refusal to heed what God had said about the evils of their fathers, and themselves to turn from it and come back to God.

Then in Verses 14 and 15 you get that gleam in the darkness which so often comes, when God gives a promise of hope. We will not take time to read it, but God says, "I will restore these people after their exile; I will bring them back to their own land which I gave to their fathers." But in the meantime, Verses 16-18, the nation is to be subjected to the ministry of other nations, coming like hunters and fishers into the land, robbing it of all its wealth and treasures.

In Verses 19-20 we have Jeremiah's amazing response. What would you say if God told you to deliver such a message today? This is what Jeremiah said:

**O Lord, my strength and my stronghold,  
my refuge in the day of trouble,  
to thee shall the nations come  
from the ends of the earth and say:  
"Our fathers have inherited nought but lies,  
worthless things in which there is no profit.  
Can man make for himself gods?  
Such are no gods!" {Jer 16:19-20 RSV}**

That is what the nations, Jeremiah says, are going to say to God at last. They are going to come to him and confess the emptiness of all the things they trusted in. Jeremiah lifts up his eyes and looks down the course of the ages and sees the end of history. And he says, "Lord, what you're doing now, though it's hard for me to bear, nevertheless, I have a stronghold in you, a place of refuge, and I know it's going to work! One day the nations are going to see the result of their incredible folly, and come and confess to you the emptiness of all the things they had followed." And he is praising God for this. God's response is,

**"Therefore, behold, I will make them know, this once I will make them know my power  
and my might, and they shall know that my name is the Lord." {Jer 16:21 RSV}**

That is, only by the utter collapse of all that men trust in will they ever have their eyes opened to what God has been saying to them. This is why God moves the way he does with individuals -- to bring them to the end of themselves, to let them get into trouble and fall apart, and bankrupt themselves in every degree. It is then that both individuals and nations get their eyes open. Then they see who God is -- see his power and his might and his love.

So God says that judgment is going to come upon this nation, and they will experience his power -- for two reasons. First, because their evil is deeply entrenched. There should not be a chapter break at this point, for we move right on:

**"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, and on the horns of their altars..." {Jer 17:1 RSV}**

Judah's sin is so deeply entrenched in the nation that nothing short of judgment is going to break it loose. We are facing something similar in our day. We have already seen how deeply entrenched the evil of our nation has become. It pervades our government, it runs through our political system, our school system, it invades our homes and recreational life. In every way it is deeply entrenched -- it is written on the heart with a pen of iron. But, more than that, in Judah's case it was also infectious evil:

**" ... their children remember their altars and their Asherim, beside every green tree, and  
on the high hills, on the mountains in the open country." {Jer 17:2-3a RSV}**

The next generation was being infected by this, and it could only get worse. Therefore the hand of God must move in judgment. He closes the section by saying,

**"Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil as the price of your sin  
throughout all your territory. You shall loosen your hand from your heritage which I  
gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land which you do not know,  
for in my anger a fire is kindled which shall burn for ever." {Jer 17:3b-4 RSV}**

At this point God begins to teach Jeremiah some great facts, the greatest lessons any man can ever know, the secrets of life. That is why I call the rest of chapter 17 the heart of this whole prophecy. For now God begins to open this young man's eyes to what lies behind the movements of God in history. If you want to understand this day in which we live, and what is happening in this strange, tumultuous, turbulent hour, or the movement of God in the past, you have to understand what God now teaches Jeremiah. The first lesson is to show him

the two ways by which men can live. And there are only two ways -- never both, but one or the other -- at any given moment. The first is set forth in Verses 5-6:

**Thus says the Lord:**

**"Cursed is the man who trusts in man  
and makes flesh his arm,  
whose heart turns away from the Lord. {Jer 17:5 RSV}**

Here is a man who trusts in man, who says that man is the ultimate solution to his own problems, who says that it lies in man to work out all the difficulties of his life and to save himself. God says "Cursed is that man," i.e., everything he does ultimately will be brought to nothing. That is what a curse does -- it removes the profit, the worth, the value of anything. The symbol of that man is interesting. God says,

**"He is like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see any good come.  
He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land." {Jer 17:6 RSV}**

Walk in the desert and look at the plants there. Notice how dry and sere they are, how wizened and stunted. There is great possibility in them, as you can find out by removing them and giving them enough water; then they will grow tremendously. But in the desert they are limited, shrunken, shriveled. That is a life which trusts in man, either in himself or anybody else. In contrast to that you have the other way of life, Verses 7-8:

**"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord." {Jer 17:7 RSV}**

That is, God himself sustains this man's trust as well as sustaining the man. He keeps his trust alive.

**"He is like a tree planted by water,  
that sends out its roots by the stream,  
and does not fear when heat comes,  
for its leaves remain green,  
and is not anxious in the year of drought,  
for it does not cease to bear fruit." {Jer 17:8 RSV}**

In my home state of Montana, in the summer months, we would often have long periods of drought when no rain fell. The land would bake and dry and crack. All the shrubbery would dry up and turn brown and sere. It was a dreary time. But there was one tree down by the stream near the house where I lived which always stayed green, no matter how dry the country around became. It was near a spring, a hidden, underground spring. No matter what happened to the country around, the tree remained green and fresh. God says, "That is like the man who has learned to trust in me." He is a man who can take it when things get tough and hard and sere and brown. When everyone else is giving up, he remains inwardly strong, strengthened by a hidden reservoir of strength. This is the secret of a life that trusts in God. You recognize how frequently this figure is used in Scripture. The first Psalm speaks of the same thing. In the next two verses you have the heart of the matter. God begins to unfold to Jeremiah what the problem is:

**The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately corrupt; {Jer 17:9a RSV}**

That is all he says. But in those two lines you have the explanation of all the misery and heartache and injustice and evil of life. It all stems from that. The heart, the natural life into which we were born, has two things wrong with it. First, it is desperately corrupt. This means it never can function as it originally was designed to do. It can never fulfill all you expect of it. It will never fulfill your ideals, or bring you to the place where you can be what you would like to be. It is corrupt. It is infected with a fatal virus. And it cannot be changed. There is nothing you can do about it, ultimately. It is useless and wasted. Therefore there is only one thing it is good for -- to be put to death. And that is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ did with it when he died some centuries later. He took that fatal nature, human nature, and he put it to death, because that was all it was good

for.

I know that many people have trouble at this point. This is the verse, among others like it in the Scriptures, which divides humanity right down the center. You either believe this verse, and act the rest of your life in these terms, understanding this fact, or you deny it and say, "It is not true; man is basically good." It is either one side or the other. Your whole system of philosophy and of education and of legislation, and everything else, will be determined by which one of those views you take. This is the Great Divide of mankind, right here.

It is amazing, but I think one of the greatest confirmations of the truth in this verse is the Constitution of the United States of America. Our founding fathers were so aware of this great fact -- that man, by nature, is desperately corrupt -- that they never trusted a single man, even the best of them, with ultimate power. They set up checks and balances by which any man in office, even the most admired of men, would have his power scrutinized and examined by others. They did not trust anybody, and rightfully so! I have often quoted these words from Winston Churchill, an astute observer of life:

Certain it is that, while men are gathering knowledge and power with ever-increasing speed, their virtues and their wisdom have not shown any notable improvement as the centuries have rolled. Under sufficient stress -- starvation, terror, warlike passion, or even cold intellectual frenzy -- the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds, and his modern woman will back him up.

Churchill understood this verse: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt." No system of philosophy, of psychology, of education, will ever serve to eliminate the wrongful, evil failing of the human heart. It cannot be done. We have to face life on those terms.

As if that were not bad enough -- that we have this poisoned well -- there is also another quality about it: it is deceitful about all things. It never looks bad, like it is. It has an amazing power to disguise itself and look good and hopeful and fair -- admirable, even. That is what is so deceitful about it. This explains why, all through the centuries, men continually keep trying to make it better. It looks as if it is just a few steps from success. This is why most of the approaches of humanity are equivalent to taking a well with poisoned water, and improving it by painting the pump!

Haven't you ever felt this way about yourself? "I really am only a few steps short of perfection. I know there are few little things that I do (and they're always little things, not very significant), just a few minor aberrations which, if I could just correct, I would be a splendid person to live with!" Do you feel that way? Then you are suffering from the deceitfulness of the heart. It can look good -- it has that ability to do so -- but it is unable to help itself. It is deceitful above all things.

The heart is clever, crafty; it can appear one way when it is quite another. Every once in a while we know this about ourselves, don't we? We know that we have a frightening ability to hide a hateful heart under flattering words, or that we can speak softly and lovingly to someone whom we utterly despise. We know we can do it; we do it all the time. We can use a sweet tone, and act and sound as if we are perfectly at ease, when inwardly we are seething with revolt and rebellion. That is the heart. It has that ability. It can appear fair. It can make the most impressive vows to do better. It can promise reform, and suffer hardship. Paul says that you can bestow all your goods to feed the poor, without love. You can give your body to be burned, without love. And to do so is worth nothing. It can do all these things with utmost sincerity, but it is a house built upon the sand, doomed to disaster.

Now, that is the heart, and the only book in the world which tells you this is the Bible -- and those which are based upon it. You will never find that information in any other source. All studies of humanity will never lead you to this revelation. This is God himself, opening up a truth which divides the world, and which men must know if they are going to face life the way it really is. No wonder Jeremiah's response is one line:

**who can understand it? {Jer 17:9b RSV}**

"Lord, if this is true, how do you expect me to run my own life? How do you expect me to solve my

problems? I can't even recognize that I have problems! How do you expect me to know what to do? How can you lay upon me any responsibility, if this is true?" Look at God's solution, Verse 10:

**"I the Lord search the mind and try the heart,  
to give to every man according to his ways,  
according to the fruit of his doings." {Jer 17:10 RSV}**

You say you want to know what is in your heart? Look at what comes out in your life. God is at work to make us act the way we are, ultimately. That is why, in Chapter 6 of the book of Galatians, Paul gives us the equivalent of this:

**"... for whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap. For he who sows to his flesh [the heart which is evil] shall of the flesh reap corruption [because that heart is desperately corrupt]; but he who sows to the Spirit [the new Spirit from God, given to him in Jesus Christ] shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting [because that God is a living God]." {cf, Gal 6:7b-8 RSV}**

The well will produce water according to its nature; the tree will produce fruit according to its nature. The Lord Jesus himself taught us that. Jeremiah's answer to this is beautiful. Verses 11-12:

**Like the partridge that gathers a brood which she did not hatch,  
so is he who gets riches but not by right;  
in the midst of his days they will leave him,  
and at his end he will be a fool. {Jer 17:11 RSV}**

He is saying that it is useless to count on natural wisdom or natural goodness to enrich your life. If all this is true, then to count on a heart which is desperately corrupt and deceitful above all things, is an absolutely stupid and foolish thing to do! And if you build your life -- gain your wealth and value and riches -- on that basis, in the midst of your life they will abandon you and leave you desolate. That is so true, is it not? They will let you down.

But, on the other hand, Verse 12:

**A glorious throne set on high from the beginning  
is the place of our sanctuary. {Jer 17:12 RSV}**

There is where a man finds the answer to his life, the solution to his problems, the understanding of his own nature, and the supply of his need for a sanctuary, a place to go. One of the reasons why men fight this idea that we are born with this kind of a nature is that they do not know of any place else to go. And to say they have to abandon the only nature they know seems to them to be tantamount to saying, "You have to commit some kind of moral suicide; you have to give your self up." And people resist that. We all do. We say, "That's suicide! You're asking me to kill myself, to die!"

The amazing thing is, that is exactly what the gospel says. The good news is that God has found a way by which you can die without dying! Isn't that interesting? You can let that old man go, painful and hurtful as it might seem at the time, because you have somewhere else to go -- and that place is God himself, the life of God, available in Jesus Christ. "A glorious throne set on high from the beginning" -- authority, and life -- "is the place of our sanctuary." There is where we hide.

You see, the gospel is in the Old Testament as well as is in the New. These old prophets understood this just as much as we do. And so, here is Jeremiah's lesson. He stands and prays, and his prayer is beautiful. Verse 14:

**Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed;  
save me, and I shall be saved; {Jer 17:14a RSV}**

"No one else can do it. Only the One who sits on a glorious throne set on high from the beginning can heal

me." The prophet stands before him and says, "Lord, here I am with this heart which was given to me by birth, which is desperately corrupt, and deceitful above all things, and all I can do is bring it to you again and again, Lord, whenever it raises its head, and say 'Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved.'"

Whenever the flesh seeks control, whenever false confidence rises within us and says, "Just watch my steam! I'll show them what I can do! Give me a chance; I've got what it takes to handle it!" that is this deceitful heart talking to us. And whenever that occurs, the prophet's advise is, "Run to God, hide in the sanctuary of the glorious throne set on high, where you are seated with Christ in heavenly places." And you will find a place to stand, a resource to live from, and God himself will heal you, and you will be healed; he will save you, and you will be saved.

With that truth under his belt, God sent Jeremiah back to the nation with another message. We will not take time to read it all, but it closes this chapter. This message is quite different from the first one. Let us look at just a few verses of it, beginning with Verse 19:

**Thus said the Lord to me: "Go and stand in the Benjamin Gate, by which the kings of Judah enter and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem, and say: 'Hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who enter by these gates. Thus says the Lord: Take heed for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the sabbath or do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers.'" {Jer 17:19;22 RSV}**

What a strange message to send! Why is God so concerned about the sabbath all through the Bible, from beginning to end, and especially here in the last days of this nation? Why is it the sabbath he focuses on? Well, he says,

**"But if you listen to me, says the Lord, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but keep the sabbath day holy and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their princes, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall be inhabited for ever. And people shall come from the cities of Judah and the places round about Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Shephelah, from the hill country, and from the Negeb, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, cereal offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord. But if you do not listen to me, to keep the sabbath day holy...then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched.'" {Jer 17:24-27 RSV}**

Now, why the sabbath? It is amazing how this message about the sabbath has been distorted in the understanding of men in the church through the ages. The sabbath, you remember, began when God ceased from the work of creation and rested on the seventh day. He ceased from all his works. And he tells man all through the Scriptures that this is a picture of the life of faith and trust in him. It is to cease from your own works and trust in God to work on your behalf. That is keeping the sabbath. All the ceremonials and rituals which gathered around this day are only to illustrate to us what God is getting at. In the book of Hebrews he says, "... for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his," {Heb 4:10 RSV}

The sabbath is a picture to us of how God intends man to live -- not by trusting in himself, not by trusting in any other man, or in what other men can do; but accepting this new way of life, which is God himself working in us, God himself living in us; and making our humanity available to him, with our mind, our emotions, our will, and everything about us; and saying, "Lord, here I am. Here's the situation in front of me, the thing I have to do. (Maybe it is my work tomorrow and all through the week. Maybe it is some special demand made upon me by my children, by my husband or my wife. Maybe it is some difficult situation to which I must respond.) Lord, how do I meet it? Well, here I am, Lord. You meet it. You meet it in me. I'll do what is necessary, but I'll count on you to do it in me, and you'll be responsible for the results."

That is the sabbath. That means you are at rest inside, because the strain is not on you, it is on God. You are at peace inside because you do not have to be responsible for what happens; he does. That is to approach life at rest. That is the man who never turns dry and barren and sere, but who remains green and strong and fresh in the midst of all the drought and disaster around him. That is the man or woman who remains as a green tree in the time of drought, who stands continually before God in the face of every demand and says, "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved."

This weekend we have had the privilege of having with us a young man who has begun a very remarkable work in Denver, Colorado. He has had training in psychology, and he has a counseling clinic where he uses Scripture, primarily. He has been speaking to our staff and helping us to set up a counseling training center here. I would like to ask Dr. Charles Solomon to dismiss us with a word of prayer.

**Prayer:**

Our precious Lord, how we thank you that you did provide a way for us to be delivered from this nature which is "deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt" -- in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you that the old nature has been put there, and we can praise you not only that Jesus died for us, but that we died with him, were buried with him, are now seated in the heavenlies, and we can trust you to live through us and do that which we cannot do, and give us victory where otherwise we would know only defeat. Thank you for this message which taught this truth even from the Old Testament -- the gospel message. We pray now that each one of us may be able to rest in the sabbath, cease from our own works, let Christ live through us, and know his victory in us. Dismiss us with your grace, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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