WEEK 3

JEREMIAH

return to me

DAILY READINGS

MONDAY - JEREMIAH 8:18 – 9:1

In their Old Testament Survey, the scholars LaSor, Hubbard and Bush wrote that "Jeremiah's agony mirrors the agony of Yahweh at his rejection by Judah." Neither Jeremiah nor God wanted to see Babylon crush Judah. Even the strongest words of judgment came from a heart that wept over Israel's stubborn refusal to repent.

- In Romans 9:2-3, Paul spoke like Jeremiah: "I have great sorrow… in my heart…I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people…the people of Israel." How did Jeremiah and Paul develop God's compassion toward those who opposed them, rather than scorn or hatred? How can you grow more like them?

- Gilead was famous for plants that were made into medicinal salves and balms (see Genesis 37:25). Hence Jeremiah's expression "balm in Gilead" (not "bomb" in Gilead, though people sometimes hear it that way!). In what ways has God's presence been a healing balm in your life? In what areas do you wish for God's healing touch?

TUESDAY - JEREMIAH 3:22-4:4

Twice in these verses Jeremiah repeated God's call to his wayward people: "Return." God was not calling them, and does not call us, to abstract ethics, rigid rules to obey "or else." God called them, and us, to a relationship, a decision to walk daily with God. If Israel would return to the relationship, God said, he would provide the spiritual healing they needed.

- What differences do you see between calling people to "return to correct doctrine" or "return to good actions" and the call God in fact sent through Jeremiah: "return to me" (4:1)? To what extent has God become a personal presence in your life, rather than just an idea? What steps help open you to a more personal connection with God?

- Verses 23-25 record a kind of divine "wishful thinking," the words God (and Jeremiah) wished Judah's people would say. What things today are like the deceptive "idolatrous commotion on the hills" in Jeremiah's time? When have you let something go in order to return to God? What did it take to show you that you needed to change course?

WEDNESDAY - JEREMIAH 26:1-13

Jeremiah used a key idea twice in this Temple sermon: "The Lord will relent." At another spot in the book (which, remember, is a collection, not in chronological order), we read God saying, "I have spoken and will not relent" (Jeremiah 4:28). But in the Temple, Jeremiah said, "If you change your behavior, God will relent and spare you from disaster."

- In the book of Jonah, God sent another prophet to preach disaster. The hearers repented and God relented. That made Jonah furious: "Isn't this what I said, LORD?...I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God…who relents from sending disaster" (Jonah 4:2). Was Jeremiah right—could Israel have avoided exile by truly turning back to God? Or do you believe God is unable to shape how empires like Babylon act?

- At one time, God's tabernacle was in Shiloh (see Joshua 18:1). By Jeremiah's day, Shiloh lay in ruins (Jeremiah 7:12-15). God blessed XRDS Church, in the past. Does that mean God must protect us today, whatever our spiritual condition?

THURSDAY - JEREMIAH 18:1-12

Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house led him to teach the principle scholars call "conditional prophecy." Many in his day said, "God can't allow us to face judgment —he promised to look after Israel." To them, the message was, "If you leave God, God's shelter may leave you." But it also gave hope to those who felt, "It's no use—we're doomed." To them, Jeremiah said, "Prophecy is not destiny, but warning. If you repent, God will forgive and protect."

- Prophecy doesn't bind either God or us. We can always choose to change course (for good or for ill), and God is free to respond to our choices. When have you chosen to go against what God asks of you? If it brought bad results, what did you learn? Could you (or can you) see past your failure and ask God to help you live in God's way?

- Sadly, verse 12 said Judah's people responded to God's call by saying "It's no use" and continuing on their doomed course. Is there any part of your life that makes you feel as though "it's no use?" How can what Jeremiah taught about God give you hope?

FRIDAY - JEREMIAH 3:12-20

Jeremiah mixed images of God as scorned husband and parent to call to Judah. Commentator John Guest noted, "The divorce laws [of Jeremiah's day] said there was no second chance. Yet God's love transcends our frailties and offers us a new marriage with Him." We can "see" Jeremiah pleading, "'Return!' [says God]. 'How gladly I would treat you like my children.'"

- Jeremiah echoed God's message to Moses: "The LORD…the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:6-7). How have you experienced God's grace and compassion, God's eagerness to forgive you and welcome you back when you miss the mark?

- Do you tend to think of God having feelings, or as dispassionate? Ephesians 4:30 urged Christians, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." Reflect on how your lack of trust or defiant acts might grieve God. How can you take steps to avoid bringing God grief?

SATURDAY - JEREMIAH 4:6-14

God never gives up. It's harder to see in the English Bible, but Jeremiah was a gifted Hebrew poet. He used a series of vivid poetic images in chapter 4 to warn Israel of the looming danger the nation faced. The Babylonian lion was out of his lair; his chariots were coming like a whirlwind. But those grim images were not a simple forecast; they were the backdrop for an appeal. The prophet/poet ended with "Wash the evil from your heart and be saved."

- "Wash the evil from your heart" might sound as if we just need to think differently. The UBS Translator's Handbook on Jeremiah notes that the Hebrew phrase is about how our inner thoughts shape our way of life: "Translators can say 'clean all the evil from your lives' or 'make your hearts [or, lives] clean; remove all the evil.'" How are you, day by day, giving God access to your thoughts, so that through them God can be at work to reshape your way of life?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1, Jeremiah agonizes over the suffering that the people must endured because they have turned away from God. He wishes that some medicinal balm might be applied to the land so they might be healed of their wrongdoing. When we are spiritually sick and suffering, what kind of balms can we apply? Do you believe there are ways in which the world of 2020 is sick and suffering? What kind of balm might help? In what ways does the spiritual situation today resemble that of the "promised land" in Jeremiah's day? In what ways does it differ?

2. In Jeremiah 3:22-4:4, Jeremiah, like God, is suffering because of the Hebrew people's sinful ways, including the worship of false gods. God was calling each person to return to a living relationship with him, but warned that, if they didn't, they would suffer grave consequences. What kinds of blessings do you believe grow out of a strong personal relationship with God? In what ways have you seen yourselves or others suffer from being out of relationship with God? What are the some of the barriers that keep even people who call themselves Christians from having a truly personal relationship with Christ? What do you believe a "personal relationship with Christ" looks like in everyday living?

3. Read Jeremiah 26:1-13. God knew that the Babylonian empire was on the verge of attacking Judah and destroying Jerusalem. To avoid the destruction of Jerusalem, God through Jeremiah calls the people to once again enter into a relationship with him and follow his laws. Do you believe that, if the people had obeyed and returned to God, the Babylonian invasion or the destruction of Jerusalem would not have happened? Do you believe God's protection operated differently in Jeremiah's day, with Israel embodying God's purposes (however imperfectly) in a specific nation, than it does today with God's people drawn from every nation, tribe and tongue? Will God protect the so-called Christian world under all circumstances? Did God protect Jesus, or the Apostle Paul? In what ways do you believe you can depend on God to protect you and your family?

4. In Jeremiah 18:1-12, the potter saw that his creation was deeply flawed, so he destroyed it and remade it. The pot was inanimate, so it couldn't fix itself, and was of "no use." But people can change. Just as prophesy is not a rigidly unchanging destiny, our flawed lives are subject to change. We are not clay pots—we can choose to turn to God and avoid the destruction we set ourselves up for. Can you think of a time when you knew you were doing something God didn't want and you paid a price for it? Is it ever too late for a person to change his or her life?

5. Read Jeremiah 3:12-20. God was heartbroken about how his people have treated him. Nevertheless, God was clearly willing to forgive them and bless Jerusalem if the people repented (changed course) and returned to him. Have you ever, after turning away from God, returned to your faith and had a sense of God's pleasure, love and blessings? Do you believe that God grieves when we turn away from him and rejoices when we return to him? In what ways can we cause God to rejoice?

6. Read Jeremiah 4:6-14. The Babylonians were already on the march toward Judah. But…God doesn't give up. At the end of the reading, God declares, "Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved." In what ways does this Scripture speak to our lives? In what way can we do what God asked of the Hebrews? How do you believe God measures and responds to our faithfulness?

PRAY

God, your people didn't seem to "get it." No matter what Jeremiah preached, they refused to cooperate with you to create an inner life that reflected your love, your joy, and your peace. Help me to be wiser than they were. Help me trust that you have my best interests at heart, even if you challenge me or call me to change. I want to want what you want, Lord.
Make this true for me. Amen.