“For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?” (Jeremiah 8:21, 22).

Picture a parent bringing his child to the hospital emergency room for care. The doctor takes a look at the child and realizes quickly that he is suffering from smallpox. The doctor says, “We have the vaccine available here! Why did you not have your child immunized? This child is suffering and is probably facing death, when we had medicine to keep him from catching this disease!”

Jeremiah witnessed a similar situation. His nation was dying of a sickness which could have been prevented. The grief overwhelmed him:

My sorrow is beyond healing, my heart is faint within me! Behold, listen! The cry of the daughter of my people from a distant land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not within her?” “Why have they provoked Me with their graven images, with foreign idols?” “Harvest is past, summer is ended, and we are not saved.” For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored? (Jeremiah 8:18–22).

This plaintive cry came from one who loved his nation but knew that the people had passed the time when they could have been brought back to God. You may see your own community going down the road of sin, rebellion, greed, and godlessness. Jeremiah’s cries should cause each of us to take notice and encourage our neighbors to repent before it is too late.

OPPORTUNITIES PASS

The first lesson we should glean from Jeremiah’s cry is that opportunities pass. There had been all kinds of warnings for Judah, but the people had excused their wrongdoing and had gone right on sinning, even while talking about devotion to God. They built idols and worshiped them while claiming to be loyal to the Lord. Did God love Judah? Yes, He loved them deeply! However, love cannot forever overlook sin and rebellion.

God is merciful and graceful to all. He wants everyone to be saved (2 Peter 3:9). In Romans 3:21–26, Paul pictured the longing of God’s heart for our salvation:

But now apart from law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Even though God is merciful, graceful, loving, and forgiving, we can go too far and miss our opportunities for repentance. To the people in Noah’s day, God said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Genesis 6:3a). He gave them
120 years to repent, but the day came when the ark was sealed and the floods came. The warnings were over. The harvest had come. The summer was ended, and the people were not saved.

In Judah, prophets had poured out their hearts to get them to repent. The people, however, did not believe that God would actually allow them to be taken into captivity. The warnings fell on deaf ears. Now, they had waited too long.

God wants each of us to be saved. He is patient with us and gives us time to learn and change. Nevertheless, if we go on in sin, rebelling against God and His will, the time of patience will run out. Solomon pictured such a time in Proverbs 1:24–28:

“Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; and you neglected all my counsel and did not want my reproof; I will also laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes, when your dread comes like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but they will not find me.”

Eventually, God runs out of patience with sinful people. We must learn that the time to repent and obey God is as soon as we learn we are wrong. Every delay hardens our hearts and pushes us toward a harvest without salvation.

**GOD IS READY TO FORGIVE**

The second lesson we learn is that God is full of compassion. In Jeremiah 8:22 we find some interesting questions: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?”

Balm was a gum which was harvested from trees in and around Gilead. It was one of Gilead’s greatest sources of trade and commerce. It was considered to be a great medicinal help to the hurting. Jeremiah was making a simple point: Since the answer to their problem was available, why had they not used it? Jeremiah’s questions in 8:22 were rhetorical; the answers should have been obvious. The posing of these questions was intended to make the people think. The spiritual “balm of Gilead” was available then, and it is available now. It was and still is the healing, forgiving hand of God. God is always ready to apply the healing balm made available to all through the blood of Christ on the cross.

Judah had doctors to apply balm for physical healing. For our spiritual healing, we have the Great Physician, Jesus Christ. He said, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick” (Luke 5:31; see Mark 2:17). Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Even though He stands ready to save those who come to Him for treatment, the majority go their own way, refusing the cure and living as though there were no solutions to their problems.

Let us never forget the message of these great Scriptures:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).

But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9).

He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25).

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age (Titus 2:11, 12).

The medicine is here. The doctor is available, but we must have the faith to come to Him and follow His plan to be cured.

**DISOBEDIENCE HURTS**

The third lesson is that disobedience hurts. How do you feel when those you love refuse to do right? Godly parents train their children in the way of the Lord, accompany them to worship services and Bible classes their whole lives, and live for God in front of them. Such parents are heartbroken when their children make ungodly choices and turn to sinful living. Jeremiah was like a heartbroken parent. He said,

O that my head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my
Being the prophet to Judah was not just a job to Jeremiah. His whole heart was involved. He loved his people and longed for them to change. What a powerful example he provides for every person who wants to preach or teach people today! It is not enough to preach or teach the right words. We must put our whole hearts into our lessons if they are to have any effect on people. We must be certain to speak the truths people need to hear to make their lives right with the Lord, but we must use the Word of God with care and love. The Word is the sword of the Spirit. It must be used with care and attention, not as a chopping axe, slicing in all directions.

PEOPLE ARE AMAZING!

The fourth lesson is that people are a mystery. It seems strange, looking back, that the people of Judah would go on in their sin. Why didn’t they repent? Why couldn’t they see the wrong and turn their lives around? Here is the answer:

“They bend their tongue like their bow; lies and not truth prevail in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know Me,” declares the Lord. “... they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity. Your dwelling is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they refuse to know Me,” declares the Lord (Jeremiah 9:3-6; emphasis mine).

At the heart of rebellion is a failure to know God. Too often, religion becomes a set of rules. We have the “form of godliness, but deny the power” (2 Timothy 3:5). For service to God to be fulfilling and rich, it must be built on a close relationship with God. If one does not know the Lord, he will not be able to live the kind of life He demands.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, Paul wrote,

And to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

When we know the Lord, we have the will to live as He calls us to live. If we do not know Him, sin will grow in our lives like weeds in the gardens of our souls.

Since the people of Judah did not know God, they became deceivers, slanderers, liars, and oppressors. If anyone had asked them about their faith, they certainly would have claimed to be religious. Religion, however, does not always bring righteousness. The real question is “What kind of relationship do you have with God?”

When our relationship with God is wrong, sin grows constantly. Jeremiah wrote,

Who is the wise man that may understand this? And who is he to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken, that he may declare it? Why is the land ruined, laid waste like a desert, so that no one passes through? The Lord said, “Because they have forsaken My law which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice nor walked according to it, but have walked after the stubbornness of their heart and after the Baals, as their fathers taught them” (Jeremiah 9:12-14).

Knowing God and obeying His commands go hand in hand. John emphasized this truth in the New Testament: “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 John 2:3). Our obedience includes the fundamentals of the gospel: believing in Christ as the Son of God (1 John 5:13), turning from our sins in repentance, and being baptized to have our sins washed away (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Furthermore, obedience involves dying to self and to sin and living for Him daily (2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Peter 2:24). It involves a changed life submitted to the Lord (Romans 12:1, 2; James 4:7).

CONCLUSION

Look deep into your own life. Do you know the Lord? Have you yielded your own heart and life to Him in obedience to His will? To wait to obey God is dangerous, because the harvest will pass and the summer will end. Salvation is available now in Christ. Will you please decide today to give your life to Him?

Leon Barnes