

Jeremiah's Yoke



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 16:1–13; Hos. 1:1–3; Jer. 27:1–18; Dan. 4:25; Jeremiah 28; 2 Tim. 4:3, 4.*

Memory Text: “And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (*Luke 9:23*).

As we have already seen, God's prophets preached not only through words but also through object lessons. At times the prophets had to live out the messages; it was another way to get the point across.

Thus, Jeremiah again was called to “live out” the words he was to deliver. First, he had to wear a wooden yoke. “Thus saith the LORD to me; make thee bonds and yokes, and put them upon thy neck” (*Jer. 27:2*). That must have been a burdensome task, even under the best of circumstances; in this case, it became harder because a false prophet challenged what Jeremiah said. This week we will get a powerful look at truth and error contending for the hearts and minds of the people. We will see, too, how a message of grace can also be a false message.

Jeremiah also was forbidden to enter into mourning when others mourned and rejoicing when others rejoiced. In these cases, the point was to help the people realize what was coming because of their sins, and so to repent and obey, lessening the doleful consequence of their sinful actions.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 28.

A Solitary Life

No question, Jeremiah's lot in life wasn't an easy one (he would be the first to admit it too!). Things, though, were even harder than we might have imagined.

Read Jeremiah 16:1–13. What was the Lord's message to Jeremiah here? However harsh, in what ways would it have been a blessing to the prophet? (*Compare with Hos. 1:1–3.*)

In contrast to Hosea, who was to marry a harlot in order to show just how corrupt the relationship had become between the Lord and Israel because of the nation's spiritual harlotry, Jeremiah was to refrain from marriage and from having children altogether. This was something rather rare and extreme for that time and culture. In Israel, starting a family was very important for every young man. Besides the love and companionship between spouses, it was also important to carry on the family name. Why did God forbid Jeremiah from starting a family? It was so that his own life would be an object lesson on how terrible that time would be when families broke up and when the pain of separation became a heavy burden on the survivors. Jeremiah's lack of family life was a constant warning and lesson for his contemporaries.

Jeremiah's solitary lot extended into other areas as well. He was forbidden to enter a house where there was mourning; this would symbolize the people's unwillingness to respond to God's calls for repentance and revival.

Along with times of mourning, he was not to join their festivals of joy and celebration. This was to symbolize the coming time when the Babylonians would bring an end to all of their joy and rejoicing.

In these ways, the human bonds that are forged, whether in mourning or joy, would be denied Jeremiah. His life and the sorrows of his life were to be object lessons. If only the nation would learn from them!

How should this account help us learn to appreciate the human support that we enjoy getting from others, or that we give to others? However important this support, how can we learn that, ultimately, our best support comes only from the Lord?

Jeremiah's Yoke

Read Jeremiah 27:1–18. What is the message of the Lord to the people? Why would this seem treasonous to many who heard it?

The yoke Jeremiah had to put on his body was an unmistakable sign of the humiliation that the nation suffered; it's what we call a military occupation. (In Deuteronomy 28:48 and 1 Kings 12:4, the idea of a yoke appears as an expression of oppression.) Jeremiah had to experience physically what the Babylonian invasion meant. The wooden yoke Jeremiah put on his arms and shoulders was one and a half meters long and eight centimeters thick. The essence of his message was that if a country revolted against Babylon, the Lord would take it as if the country had revolted against Him, and the rebellious would suffer as a result.

Though there is some ambiguity in the original texts, it seems that Jeremiah not only had to make a yoke for himself but also make yokes for the envoys of foreign countries who had come to Jerusalem and were plotting against Nebuchadnezzar—despite the Lord's warnings not to. The natural response would be to fight against a foreign invader, which is what they wanted to do. No doubt, then, Jeremiah's words were not at all welcome.

What is especially important about the message in Jeremiah 27:5? (See also Dan. 4:25.)

Here again, as we find all through both the Old and New Testaments, the Lord as Creator is Sovereign over all the earth. Even amid what appears to be chaos and catastrophe (invasion and dominion by a pagan nation), the power and authority of God are revealed, and this was, and is, to be a source of hope to all in the faithful remnant.

It's one thing to be under a yoke of bondage. However, ask yourself: Have you placed someone else under an unfair yoke, and if so, why not remove it now?

War of the Prophets

Bad news is bad news, and often we don't want to hear it, or we want to rationalize it away. Such was the case here in Judah with Jeremiah and the yoke that he bore, an unmistakable message of warning to the people. "The amazement of the assembled council of nations knew no bounds when Jeremiah, carrying the yoke of subjection about his neck, made known to them the will of God."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 444.

Read Jeremiah 28:1–9. Imagine you are a Judean standing there and watching all this going on. Whom would you believe? Whom would you *want* to believe? What reason would you have, if any, for believing Hananiah rather than Jeremiah?

Jeremiah raised his voice in the name of God, and Hananiah spoke in the name of God too. But who was speaking for God? They both couldn't be! For us today, the answer is obvious. For someone at that time, it might have been more difficult, even though Jeremiah does make a powerful point in verses 8, 9: *the prophets in the past have preached the same message that I am, that of judgment and doom.*

"Jeremiah, in the presence of the priests and people, earnestly entreated them to submit to the king of Babylon for the time the Lord had specified. He cited the men of Judah to the prophecies of Hosea, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and others whose messages of reproof and warning had been similar to his own. He referred them to events which had taken place in fulfillment of prophecies of retribution for unrepented sin. In the past the judgments of God had been visited upon the impenitent in exact fulfillment of His purpose as revealed through His messengers."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 445.

In short, just as we today are to learn lessons from sacred history, Jeremiah was seeking to get the people in his time to do the same thing: *learn from the past so you don't make the same errors that your forefathers did.* If it had been hard for them to listen to him before, now with the "ministry" of Hananiah there to counter him, Jeremiah's task was going to be that much more difficult.

Hananiah, whose name means "God has been gracious," seemed to be presenting a message of grace, of forgiveness, of salvation. What lessons should we learn from this false preacher of grace?

The Yoke of Iron

The battle between the prophets wasn't just one of words, but of deeds as well. In obedience to the command of God, Jeremiah put the wooden yoke around his neck; this was an overt symbol of the message that he had carried to the people.

What was the prophetic symbolism of Hananiah's act? *Jer. 28:1–11.*

Imagine, for example, that after Jesus cursed the fig tree (*Mark 11:13, 19–21*), someone who had heard what Jesus said and knew what had happened had planted a new fig tree in the same spot, all in an attempt to refute the prophecy of Jesus there. This is what Hananiah did with Jeremiah and the prophecy that the yoke around his neck symbolized. It was an act of open defiance of what Jeremiah said.

Note, too, Jeremiah's reaction. The texts record nothing of what he said right after the yoke was broken. He just turned around and walked away. If the story ended there, it would have seemed that the prophet had retreated in defeat.

Read Jeremiah 28:12–14. What happened next? What was Jeremiah's new message?

Jeremiah's response wasn't a message of revenge: *you did this to me, so I will do that to you*. Instead, it was another clear message from the Lord but even stronger than what came before. Hananiah might have been able to break a wooden yoke, but who can break an iron one? In a sense, what the Lord said was that by the people's obstinacy and refusal to obey they only were making matters worse. If you thought a wooden yoke was bad, try an iron one.

Who hasn't learned the hard way about making things more difficult for ourselves by obstinacy? When dealing with the Lord, why is it always better to submit and surrender right away than to keep on fighting and making things harder on yourself?

Trusting in Lies

“Hear now, Hananiah; the LORD hath not sent thee; but thou makest this people to trust in a lie” (Jer. 28:15).

The answer about who was right, whether Jeremiah or Hananiah, came soon enough. Jeremiah 28:16, 17 tells the fate of the false prophet, which was just what the true prophet had said it would be.

Though Hananiah died, he still had done damage to the nation. His works, in a sense, followed him. He made the people “to trust in a lie.” The Hebrew verb is *hiphil*, a causative form of the verb “to trust.” He caused them to trust in a lie, not in the sense of physically forcing them, but through deception. Even though the Lord had not sent him, he spoke in the name of the Lord, which carried a lot of weight in Judah. Added to that, Hananiah’s message of “grace,” “deliverance,” and “redemption” was certainly something that the people wanted to hear, considering the great threat that Babylon posed to the nation. It was, though, a false “gospel,” a false message of salvation that the Lord had not given them. So, at a time when the people needed to hear the words of Jeremiah and the message of redemption that he brought, they listened to the words of Hananiah instead, and this made their woes only worse.

What do the following texts have in common with Jeremiah 28:15?

2 Tim. 4:3, 4 _____

2 Thess. 2:10–12 _____

Things are no different today: we are in the great controversy, a battle for the hearts and minds of the world’s billions. Satan is working diligently to get as many as possible to “trust in a lie,” and that lie can come in many guises and forms, just as long as it is always a lie. After all, because Jesus said “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), Satan’s lies can be about anything and everything, just as long as they don’t contain the truth as it is in Jesus.

What are some of the lies that are prevalent in your culture today? Why is clinging to Jesus and His Word our only protection against them?

Further Thought: As we have seen, people want to believe good news, not bad. They wanted to believe, for instance, in Hananiah's message, not Jeremiah's. Today the same thing happens as well. Many still insist, for instance, that our world will only improve over time. Yet, even an atheist such as Terry Eagleton sees just how farcical that idea is: "If ever there was a pious myth and piece of credulous superstition, it is the liberal-rationalist belief that, a few hiccups apart, we are all steadily en route to a finer world. This brittle triumphalism is a hangover from the heroic epoch of liberalism, when the middle classes' star was in the ascendant. Today, it sits cheek by jowl with the cynicism, skepticism, or nihilism into which much of that honorable lineage has degenerated." —*Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (Yale University Press, 2010), Kindle Edition, p. 70. Though some aspects of life have improved, our world, in and of itself, offers us little hope, little consolation, especially in the long run. If we are to have any real hope, it has to be in something divine, not earthly, in something supernatural, not natural. And of course, that's what the gospel is all about: God's divine and supernatural intervention in our world and our lives. Without that, what do we have other than just more Hananiahs and their lies?

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Think about our earth's future as a whole, even if from a purely human standpoint. Does it look hopeful and full of promise, or does it look fearful, dangerous, and full of uncertainty? What reasons can you give for your answers?
- ❷ Jeremiah's message, as we saw in the context of Hananiah's lies, was to look at the past, to look at history, and to learn from it. Ellen G. White wrote something similar: "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."—*Life Sketches*, p. 196. What does she mean by that? What has happened in our past, and God's teaching in it, that can help us be prepared for what will undoubtedly come in the future?
- ❸ Hananiah gave a false message of grace. What are some of those false messages of grace today that we must guard ourselves against? Grace, of course, is our only hope, but in what ways can it be presented as a lie?

God's Saving Hand: Part 2

The burn treatment was very painful. Every day nurses removed the bandages and soaked the burns in saltwater. Then they gently scraped the burns to remove the dead skin to prevent infection. The nurses taught Mrs. Banda how to wash the wounds and apply the medicine. She stayed in the hospital with her husband and son to help care for them.

After two long months, Pastor Banda insisted that he must return home. He could barely walk, but he was concerned about his church members.

Joshua and his mother remained in the hospital for four more months. Every day his mother talked gently to him as she cleaned and dressed his wounds. Her presence strengthened the boy and gave him hope.

It was difficult for the family to be separated for so many months. They couldn't visit one another, but they could pray.

After six months, Joshua was transferred to a rehabilitation hospital for another three months of physical therapy. He couldn't walk, but he learned to shuffle along behind a walker. His mother began a new routine of daily therapy. She soaked his legs in warm water then stretched the muscles in his legs. It was painful, but she urged Joshua to sing instead of cry.

At last Joshua was able to go home, but his mother continued treating him and encouraged him to walk. After a year of recovery and therapy, Joshua was able to walk without help.

Pastor Banda's recovery took a long time too. His damaged leg muscles would not stretch enough to allow him to ride a bicycle. And this made it very difficult for him to get from one church to another in the countryside. But his churches continued to grow in size and in faith.

Pastor Banda knows that throughout their ordeal God was beside each member of the family, encouraging, blessing, and healing. "God was blessing us even during our most difficult hour," he says. "When I returned to work from the hospital, the church prospered even more, and more people came into the church than had been coming before the fire."

Mrs. Banda is also grateful for God's blessings during the terrible ordeal. "I thank God for saving my husband and son," she says. "This experience taught me the importance of spending more time with my family. I had failed to notice some special qualities in little Joshua that I saw when he was in the hospital. For example, he has a wonderful talent for singing that I did not fully realize until I heard him singing while he was confined to his bed in the hospital. During our long hospital stay, we had time to become good friends with each other and with God."

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jeremiah 28:1–17; 2 Timothy 4:3, 4*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Analyze the difference between true and false prophecy and how humankind tends to hear what they would like to hear.

Feel: Sense some of the loneliness that Jeremiah must have experienced as a result of constant opposition to the message that God gave him.

Do: Resolve to listen to and obey God’s message, even if it is not necessarily the one that he or she would like to hear.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: True and False Prophecy

A What are some markers that help us to differentiate between true and false prophecy?

B Why is it easier to accept a message that is more pleasing to our ears? Are all difficult messages automatically the true ones? Explain.

II. Feel: Jeremiah’s Loneliness

A Was it fair of God to ask Jeremiah to remain single and abstain from mourning and joy? Why, or why not?

B How far should our involvement in God’s work go in terms of our personal lives and family relationships?

III. Do: Sound Doctrine

A Why would it be necessary to follow sound doctrine in the times we are living in?

B What type of message do we proclaim to others? If it is a tuned-down gospel geared to what people would like to hear, how can we shift to delivering a not-so-popular message (in love)?

► **Summary:** Jeremiah lived out his message in a very personal way, maybe sometimes too personal for our liking, as he had to abstain from a lot of social interaction. But all this communicated a powerful message. Even if there was a lot of resistance against it, in the end it proved to be God’s message.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jeremiah 16:1–13, Hosea 1:1–3*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The personal lives of Old Testament prophets were often intertwined with the messages they preached. While God may not ask us to marry a prostitute, as in the case of Hosea, or never to marry, neither to mourn nor rejoice, as in the case of Jeremiah, God might very well ask us to do things that take us out of our comfort zones. We need to be ready for that.

Just for Teachers: How much can God ask of us when we follow Him? It is hard to see a marked difference between the message and the person of the Old Testament prophets. Both Hosea and Jeremiah provide sobering examples as to how far the personal life of the prophet can be absorbed into his message. Hosea, on the one hand, was commanded by God to marry a prostitute, whereas Jeremiah had to abstain from marriage for the duration of his life (the Hebrew text in Jeremiah 16:2 is clear on that) on God's instruction. He was also kept from entering a house of mourning or joining in a festive occasion.

All this served to dramatically illustrate God's message to His people and move them to return and repent. Life must have been very lonely at times for Jeremiah. On the other hand, we sometimes get very uncomfortable when God asks us to do something that goes beyond church attendance on Sabbath.

Opening Discussion: James and Ellen G. White had four sons. Edson and William both became Seventh-day Adventist ministers. Herbert died as an infant. The short life of Henry, who died at the age of 16, illustrates how far Ellen G. White's ministry also impacted her family life.

Born in 1847, Henry contracted pneumonia at only four months. Through the fervent prayers of his parents, he miraculously recovered. At only one year of age, he was entrusted into the care of Frances Howland for five years, while Ellen and James traveled and ministered throughout the eastern United States.

Leaving her child in the care of good friends was a difficult decision. Indeed, Ellen called this the "greatest sacrifice" she had ever had to make with regard to her ministry, and she suffered like Jeremiah did.

In early December of 1863, Ellen and James, while on a trip, had felt the urge to end their trip early and return to their three children, who were staying once more with the Howlands in Topsham, Maine. Henry became

ill just four days later and died on December 8. It was a hard blow to the family, and Ellen expressed how she wished to have spent more time with her children (compare Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 101–103).

What sacrifices has God asked of you for the sake of His calling?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: “Itching ears” (literally “itching or tickling the ears”) is an apt metaphor for the human tendency to create a reality that is more pleasing than the one that we don’t want to face. Sound doctrine is contrasted with a message that satisfies human desires but does not change sinful behavior. Study with the class the contrast between these two messages and what makes people prefer the one over the other (compare 2 Tim. 4:3, 4).

Bible Commentary

Wood versus iron. The yoke that Jeremiah was to wear was made of wood, a material that is strong but not necessarily as lasting as iron. Archaeological excavations rarely uncover remains of objects made from wood. As it is organic material, it rots and disintegrates.

Iron, on the other hand, has much more enduring properties, and much more uncomfortable ones, for that matter. The change from a wooden to an iron yoke in response to the counterfeit message of the false prophets sends a strong warning: we should not make light of God’s messages.

I. Wooden Yoke (*Review Jeremiah 27:1–18 with your class.*)

The symbolic act of the wooden yoke, in Jeremiah 27, had a universal tone to it, as Jeremiah had initially been called to be a “prophet to the nations” (1:5, *NKJV*). The message was first given in the time of King Jehoiakim, somewhere between 609 and 605 B.C., and then again in the time of Zedekiah, sometime before or around 594 B.C. Jeremiah’s message was addressed to three different audiences: to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, all hostile nations surrounding Judah (27:1–11); to King Zedekiah (vss. 12–15); and to the priests and people (vss. 16–18). All three messages had in common an almost identical warning against false prophets (vss. 9, 14, 16), which indicates that there was an ongoing struggle between true and counterfeit prophecies.

The message itself was simple and clear: serve the king of Babylon and you will live (vss. 11, 12, 17). The yoke symbolized Babylonian rule, and serving Babylon was an act of obedience to God. However, at the same time, God

made it clear that Babylon's time would also come ("until the time of his land comes," vs. 7, *NKJV*). There was a limit to the exile, hence the wooden yoke. As a matter of fact, if Judah would have served Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah would not have rebelled against him, then Jerusalem would have been spared (vs. 17).

Consider This: God punished Judah as the result of their ongoing rebellion, but then they even rebelled against the punishment. Why is it so difficult to accept discipline instead of continuously fighting it?

II. Counterfeit Prophecies *(Review Jeremiah 28:1–11 and 2 Timothy 4:3, 4 with your class.)*

The problem of false prophets must have been a permanent challenge to Jeremiah's ministry. It came to a crisis when the false prophet Hananiah, in direct response to Jeremiah's wooden yoke message in chapter 27, plainly contradicted God's prophet.

As Jeremiah did, Hananiah used the same introductory formula ("Thus speaks the LORD," vs. 2, *NKJV*), and the same prophetic perfect ("I have broken the yoke"), as though the prophecy were so sure that it was described as completed already. Furthermore, he set definite dates (vs. 3: "two full years") and referred to definite names (vs. 4: "Jeconiah"—another name for Jehoiachin). During that time, Nebuchadnezzar was quenching an internal revolt, which might have supplied the necessary courage for Hananiah's prophecy.

Interestingly, Jeremiah's response was a simple "Amen!" He did not defend himself but just pointed to the contrast between popular and difficult messages of which the latter ones had proven historically to be the true ones. Only history would prove either of them correct (*compare Deut. 18:20–22*).

In response, the false prophet enacted another symbolic act (i.e., taking the wooden yoke off Jeremiah and breaking it). It could not get more impressive or more authoritative. The similarities between true and false prophecy were overwhelming. The people had heard what they wanted to hear, and Jeremiah just turned around and left quietly. This might have been the cause of Zedekiah's subsequent rebellion against Babylon, which eventually brought on the destruction of Jerusalem.

Consider This: How can we differentiate between truth and error, especially when both are so close to each other?

III. Iron Yoke *(Review Jeremiah 28:12–17 with your class.)*

Jeremiah came back, not on his own account, but with a message from God. His message was twofold. The broken wooden yoke would be replaced by

an iron yoke, which could not be broken, indicating that Judah would no longer be able to escape the Babylonian destruction, and things would be so much harder from now on, just as iron is so much harder than wood.

The second part of the message was directed against Hananiah and prophesied his death, which came swiftly after two months. Rebellion against God and His prophet has its price. It was a sad confirmation of Jeremiah's message.

Consider This: Sometimes it is better to remain silent (as Jeremiah did) than to defend oneself. How can we know when to do what?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The stories of the wood and iron yokes are sobering ones, taking into consideration that they ended with the death of the false prophet. The narratives talk about rebellion and the lack of submission. We need to learn how to submit when it is time to submit and to stand up when it is time to resist.

Thought/Application Questions:

① What does submission to God's will mean for your life?

② Think about your church for a moment. What type of message is it preaching in your community? In what ways is it a popular message or an unpopular one? Most important, how is it God's message?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Wood and iron are at the center of this week's lesson study.

Class/Individual Activities:

① Bring a piece of wood (or even a wooden yoke) and a piece of iron (maybe a garden or farming tool) to church and brainstorm together about each object's properties and advantages and disadvantages. If such objects are not available, proceed with the discussion without visual aids.

② As a class, prepare a skit for church where you replay the dialogue between the true (Jeremiah) and the false (Hananiah) prophet from Jeremiah 28.