

Jeremiah 8 — Four Voice “Choir”

Lesson Eight of 52

Originally presented as part of Bob Mendelsohn’s 52-part teaching series on Jeremiah in 2022. References in the video to contemporary events or gatherings reflect the time of the original recording.

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Introduction

Jeremiah 8 continues the sermon we began in chapter 7. There we encountered False Worship, and now we move to the second problem: False Prophets. One of the challenges in reading the prophets is determining who is speaking. Sometimes it is clearly the Lord, sometimes it is Jeremiah, sometimes we hear the people themselves, and sometimes we hear those who claim to speak for God. In this chapter those voices seem almost to overlap, and we must listen carefully to distinguish them.

I call it a Four Voice “Choir,” but don’t imagine four singers standing together producing beautiful harmony. This choir is a cacophony. We will hear the voice of God, the voice of Judah, the voice of Jeremiah and the voice of the false prophets. The voices compete with one another and contradict one another, revealing just how confused the spiritual condition of Judah has become. Among all those voices comes one terribly reassuring message: “Peace, peace.” The problem is that there is no peace.

Jeremiah has already shown us people trusting in the Temple while refusing to listen to the God whose Temple it was. Now we discover another reason they could remain so confident: there were voices telling them that everything was going to be all right. Let’s dig into Jeremiah 8 and hear, really hear, what God is saying to our people.

1. Generation of the Dead — Jeremiah 8:1–3

Chapter 8 begins with an appalling picture. The bones of the kings of Judah, the officials, the priests, the prophets and the ordinary inhabitants of Jerusalem will be brought out of their graves and exposed before the sun, moon and stars. (8:1–2) These are the very heavenly bodies they had loved, served, followed, consulted and worshipped. Now those supposed gods will do absolutely nothing for them. Their bones will not even be gathered and buried again, but will become like refuse on the ground. The humiliation of Judah will extend beyond death itself.

There is a terrible irony here. The people had looked upward to the heavens for guidance rather than upward to the One who made the heavens. They worshipped the creation rather than the Creator, and now Jeremiah pictures their remains lying helpless beneath those same objects of worship. The sun will shine, the moon will appear and the stars will continue in their courses, but none of them can rescue the people who trusted them. False gods always make promises they cannot keep.

Then verse 3 takes the judgment even further. Those who survive and are scattered among the nations will prefer death to life. (8:3) That’s how complete the devastation will be. Jeremiah isn’t trying to frighten people with religious exaggeration. He is describing where persistent rebellion against God is taking Judah. Chapter 7 warned them that the Temple could not save them. Chapter 8 begins by showing that neither can the gods they have chosen instead.

2. Irrational Behavior — Jeremiah 8:4–7

Now the voice changes, and God asks what ought to be obvious questions. If someone falls, don't they get up again? If someone takes the wrong road, don't they turn around? That's normal human behavior. Yet Judah has fallen and refuses to rise. They have turned away and refuse to return. God says he has listened, but they do not speak what is right. No one stops and asks, "What have I done?" Instead, everyone charges ahead like a horse rushing into battle. (8:4-6)

Jewish Insight

The repeated idea of "turning" and "returning" in these verses comes from the Hebrew root *shuv*, to turn or return. From that same biblical idea comes *teshuvah*, the familiar Jewish language of repentance. Repentance is not only feeling bad about what we have done. It involves turning around, changing direction, and complying with God's instructions. If we discover that we are walking away from God, the appropriate response is to turn and come back to him. Jeremiah's astonishment is that Judah refuses to do the most natural thing: return.

We all fall short of God's standards. The question is not whether we will ever fail, but what we do when we discover that we have. Proverbs says, "A righteous man falls seven times, and rises again" (Proverbs 24:16). Yes, you will fall. Yes, you will sin. Yes, there will be times when you find yourself away from God. Then what? Do you say, "Oh well, I've already started down the wrong path, so I might as well continue"? Or do you stop, turn to the Almighty and cry out, "God, I surrender my mistakes to you. I'm sorry. Please strengthen me to get back to you and get it right again"?

What is your ongoing choice? When you fall, when you fail, when you sin, will you turn to the Lord? When a person turns to the Lord, that's where liberty is found. We can turn inward in pride and congratulate ourselves, or turn inward in shame and condemnation. Either way, we remain focused on ourselves. A healthy response says, "I belong to God." If I know I have sinned, I turn to him. I don't merely turn to myself and promise, "I'll do better next time." It's not ultimately about me or you. It's about faith in, surrender to and trust in the Almighty. Will you turn to him?

You will turn to something. You will trust in something. You will put your faith somewhere. I recommend you turn to the Lord.

Jeremiah then gives us one of those wonderful observations from the natural world. The stork knows its appointed seasons. (8:7) The turtledove, swift and thrush know when it is time to migrate. Somehow birds know what they are supposed to do, but God's people do not know the ordinance of the LORD. Creation appears to understand its Creator better than the people to whom God has spoken.

English novelist Samuel Butler said: *"All animals, except man, know that the principal business of life is to enjoy it—and they do enjoy it as much as man and other circumstances will allow."*

3. Their Refusal Was Caused by Deception — Jeremiah 8:8–12

Whose deception is this? The false prophets are responsible. The people say, in effect, "The Word is with us. The Torah is ours." (8:8) I hear comments like this regularly. "I'm Jewish." It can become a trump card tossed into the conversation. We are OK; we don't need to comply, obey or listen to what God says because we have the Torah and therefore an automatic relationship with God. Some people may no longer attend synagogue but still imagine they have an inside track with God, almost a loyalty card with him. He's on our team. But these are the kinds of assurances the false prophets were giving the people. They had learned from the wrong teachers.

Life Application

The false prophets could say, “We have the Torah.” In chapter 7 it was, “We have the Temple.” We could add, “We have the Talmud. We have the sages.” But before anyone gets smug about that, Christians can play the same game. How many Bibles do you have at home? How much time have you spent in any one of them? Having the Word is not the same as keeping the Word. Possessing Scripture does not equal listening to the God who speaks through Scripture. That was Judah’s problem. They could point to Torah while refusing the very word God was speaking to them.

And what do the false prophets preach? “Peace, peace,” shalom, shalom, when there is no shalom. (8:11) It is a terrible thing to declare God’s approval and intervention when he is not involved. Jeremiah will return to this throughout his prophecy. The false prophets offer reassurance without repentance, comfort without truth. In Australian language, the message is, “She’ll be right, mate.” But she won’t be right. They are telling the people exactly what they want to hear while judgment is coming.

This problem did not disappear with Jeremiah. Peter warned that false teachers would arise among believers and secretly introduce destructive teaching (2 Peter 2:1–3). False teaching often reassures us precisely where God is confronting us. If someone tells us to “follow your heart” or that sin doesn’t matter, that repentance is unnecessary or that God simply approves whatever we choose, we should be very careful whose voice we are hearing.

Jeremiah asks, “Were they ashamed because of the abomination they had done?” His answer is devastating: “They certainly were not ashamed, and they did not know how to blush” (8:12). Guilt is right when we are wrong. False teachers can lead people wrongly, but even then, we remain responsible for whom we choose to hear. Whoever we ‘hear’, we follow. God help us to hear godly leaders who lead us to the Throne of Grace.

4. Their Refusal Leads to Judgment — Jeremiah 8:13–22

The cacophony now becomes unmistakable. We hear the false prophets assuring the people that there is peace. We hear the people of Judah acting as though everything is all right. We hear God announcing judgment. And we hear Jeremiah making it painfully clear that everything is not all right. These voices do not harmonize. They clash, and the tragedy is that the people have chosen to listen to the false prophets rather than to the true prophet whom God sent to them.

The consequences now arrive. The harvest has failed. The people retreat toward the fortified cities, but there is no safety there. (Jeremiah 8:14) From Dan in the north comes the sound of the enemy’s horses, and the whole land trembles. (8:16) The language becomes increasingly severe: serpents are coming which cannot be charmed. (8:17) This is no longer the false prophets’ “Peace, peace.” Judgment is approaching, and Judah’s confidence cannot prevent it.

Then the voice changes again, and Jeremiah’s grief comes pouring through. “My sorrow is beyond healing; my heart is faint within me.” (8:18) He hears the cry of his people from a distant land: “Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not within her?” (8:19) But that question itself exposes the problem. Yes, God had chosen Zion. Yes, the Temple stood in Jerusalem. But the people had provoked him with their idols. Once again, they were trusting the evidence of God’s presence while refusing the God who was present.

Then comes one of Jeremiah’s unforgettable lines: “Harvest is past, summer is ended, and we are not saved.” (8:20) There is enormous sadness in those words. The expected season of rescue has come and gone, and nothing has changed. Jeremiah does not stand at a safe distance announcing the people’s judgment with satisfaction. “For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me.” (8:21) The true

prophet is distinguished from the false prophets not only because he tells the truth, but because the truth breaks his heart.

And finally Jeremiah asks, “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?” (8:22) Gilead was known for its balm, so the question is deliberately painful. The medicine exists. The physician exists. Yet the patient remains desperately ill. Judah’s problem is not that God has provided no remedy. The people have continually refused to turn to him.

Jeremiah didn’t have a big following. If we want a big following, we can entertain people and tell them what they want to hear. Jeremiah chose something else. He spoke the word God gave him, even when almost no one was listening. The question remains for us: will we hear him?

Conclusion

Jeremiah 8 has given us four voices, but they have not produced harmony. God speaks truth and warns of judgment. Judah insists that all is well. The false prophets reinforce that confidence with their cry of “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. And Jeremiah, standing in the middle of it all, speaks God’s truth while grieving over the people who refuse to hear it.

The great danger of false teaching is that it usually tells us something we would like to believe. Judah wanted to believe that possessing the Torah meant they were secure. They wanted to believe that having the Temple meant God must be on their side. They wanted to hear that peace was coming. But having the Word is not the same as keeping the Word, and hearing comforting words is not the same as hearing from God. The question is not simply, “What voices are we hearing?” but “Which voice will we trust?”

God continues to call us to turn to him. When we fall, when we fail and when we sin, the answer is not to pretend everything is all right. Nor is it to remain buried in shame. We turn to the Lord. We surrender again to the One who speaks truth, offers mercy and calls us back into relationship with himself. That is where life is found.

What’s Next?

Jeremiah 8 exposed the danger of false prophets, voices assuring the people that everything was fine when everything was most certainly not fine. But why were the people so willing to believe them? Jeremiah 9 takes us deeper into the problem. The society around Jeremiah is breaking down, deceit has become commonplace, and the prophet’s grief becomes so intense that he wishes his head were waters and his eyes a fountain of tears.

Yet the chapter eventually takes us somewhere extraordinarily important. What should a person actually have confidence in? Not wisdom, might or riches. God says, “Let the one who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me.” Knowing about God is one thing. Knowing him is another.

Next: Jeremiah 9 — False Confidences

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