

Jeremiah 9 — False Confidences

Lesson Nine 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.

WATCH

Jeremiah 9 — False Confidences

<https://youtu.be/2hMRx6Lcb5c?si=0uQNlDjGNzY4rSwL&t=296>

Watch the song by Steve Israel here: <https://youtu.be/XkBHZAzu\ jU>

Introduction

Jeremiah's grief continues from the closing verses of chapter 8. He has just cried out, "For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me" (8:21). Now chapter 9 opens with one of the passages that earned Jeremiah the title of the Weeping Prophet. "Oh 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 people!" (9:1).

This is not Jeremiah standing outside the situation and announcing God's judgment on everyone else. He is part of the people. Their sin grieves him, but so does what is going to happen to them because of that sin. Peter Craigie calls this "The Sorrow of God," and that is worth remembering as we read the chapter. Judgment is not presented as something God enjoys. There is pain here, both in the prophet who speaks for God and in the God whose people have rejected him.

Jeremiah 9 will show us a society in which trust has broken down. Neighbors deceive neighbors, brothers cannot be trusted, lies have become normal and people have trained their tongues to speak falsely. But beneath all of that is another question: what are these people trusting instead? Where do they place their confidence when their relationship with God has collapsed?

By the end of the chapter Jeremiah will give us three very familiar places to put our confidence: wisdom, strength and riches. None of those things is necessarily wrong, but none can bear the weight of being our ultimate confidence. God offers something much greater: "Let the one who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me" (9:24). That will be where this chapter finally takes us—not simply knowing about God, but knowing him.

1. Societal Breakdown — Verses 2-8

This is the crux of the argument. The family, the congregation and the leadership are all broken. They have departed from the plans and rule of God. Verse 2 says, "For all of them are

adulterers, an assembly of treacherous people.” All of them? This is what happens when perversity permeates a society and people are unchecked in doing evil.

The word translated “treacherous” comes from the Hebrew *bagad*. We’ve encountered this word before. It is associated with treachery and betrayal, but it also has an interesting connection with clothing—the outward appearance. The British phrase “turning the tables” gives us a similar picture. Detachable tabletops could be turned over so that an unclean or worn surface was hidden underneath and a more presentable surface appeared for any guests. Changing the outward appearance to lure or pretend gives us a picture of what treachery and deceit look like. Jeremiah is describing people who cannot be trusted.

The picture becomes even darker in verses 3–5. “They bend their tongues like their bows; lies and not truth prevail in the land” (9:3). Brothers betray brothers, neighbors slander neighbors, and everyone deceives his neighbor. They have actually “taught their tongue to speak lies” (9:5). Lying is no longer an occasional failure. They have practiced it. They have become good at it. Jeremiah says they “weary themselves committing wrongdoing” (9:5). Imagine working so hard at doing what is wrong that wrongdoing itself becomes exhausting.

We know something about this. Think about scams and the sadness we feel when elderly people are cheated out of their life savings. My cousin and I were talking about this very thing. Our fathers were once lured into thinking that Publishers Clearing House was sending them a check for \$250,000, which in those days felt like millions. Today the details change: emails promising fortunes if only you supply your banking information, romance scams in which the supposed husband-to-be needs just a little money to get across the line, and countless other schemes designed to win somebody’s confidence before taking what belongs to them. Jeremiah’s world did not have email or the internet, but it certainly understood these manipulations.

There is something reminiscent of Noah’s generation here. The book of Genesis describes a world in which wickedness had become pervasive and the inclination of the human heart was continually evil (Genesis 6:5). Jeremiah is looking at his own people and seeing a society in which deceit has become normal. There comes a point when God judges evil. His patience should never be mistaken for indifference.

But the text identifies something deeper than dishonesty: “Through deceit they refuse to know Me,” declares the LORD (9:6). There is the ticket out of this mess. It’s not religion. It’s not rules and devotion. It’s not promises, promises. It’s knowing God who was and is and is to come. The problem beneath the lying, betrayal and corruption is that the people refuse to know him. That theme will return with tremendous force at the end of the chapter when God tells us what is actually worth boasting about.

Then verses 7–8 begin moving us toward God’s response. The LORD says he will refine and test his people. Their tongues have become “deadly arrows.” They speak peace to their neighbors while inwardly setting an ambush for them (9:8). The breakdown is complete: what people say outwardly bears little relationship to what they intend inwardly.

2. God Breaks Down in Response — Verses 7–11

The next section begins with the Hebrew *lachen*, “therefore.” As a result of all before and given the enormity of the sin and corruption among the people of God, what is God to do? Verse 7 says, “Behold, I will refine them and put them to the test; for what else can I do, because of the daughter of My people?” (9:7). That last question is striking. God’s judgment does not come out of nowhere. Everything Jeremiah has described leads to this “therefore.” The people have chosen deceit, betrayal and falsehood, and they have refused to know God. Now there are consequences.

There are places in Jeremiah where we have difficulty determining exactly who is speaking. Is this Jeremiah expressing his own grief, or is it the Lord speaking through him? But there is no ambiguity about the judgment announced here. God’s passion is for his people, yet he will refine and test them. Verse 9 asks, “Shall I not punish them for these things?” Then the devastation spreads across the landscape. The mountains and pastures become places of mourning, the livestock are gone, and even the birds and animals have fled (9:9–10). Jerusalem itself will become “a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals,” and the cities of Judah will become desolate (9:11).

It aches the heart of God to do this. That matters because judgment can easily be portrayed as though God is standing at a distance, angrily waiting for an opportunity to punish people. That is not the picture Jeremiah gives us. We began this chapter with tears. Jeremiah is grieving, and the Lord is not indifferent to what is happening to his people. But God’s love is not sentimental. A loving God cannot overlook deceit, betrayal, injustice and evil and say that none of it matters. If evil matters, then judgment matters too.

3. God’s Reasoning in Judgment — Verses 12–16

God explains himself in this section. It’s honest, forthright and simple enough for the people of Jeremiah’s day to understand. Verse 12 asks the question: Why has the land been destroyed and laid waste like a desert? Then God answers: “Because they have abandoned My Law which I put before them, and have not obeyed My voice nor walked according to it” (9:13). This is apostasy. They had Torah, but they would not listen to it. Once more we discover that possessing the Word of God and obeying the Word of God are two very different things.

Verse 14 takes us another step. They “followed the stubbornness of their heart and the Baals, as their fathers taught them” (9:14). This is idolatry, the root problem beneath so much of what Jeremiah has been confronting. They chose other gods rather than the One True God. Notice also that they were taught to do it. Earlier we saw people teaching their tongues to lie; now we discover a generation learning idolatry from those who came before them. We pass things along. The question is what we are passing along.

The consequences are severe. God says he will feed the people wormwood, give them poisoned water to drink and scatter them among nations they and their fathers had not known (9:15–16). Moses had warned Israel centuries earlier that persistent covenant rebellion would bring precisely this kind of judgment and exile (Deuteronomy 29:22–28). Jeremiah is not inventing a

new threat. He is announcing that the consequences Israel had been warned about are now arriving.

4. Utter Sadness — Verses 17-22

The sadness that opened the chapter now returns in full force. God calls for the mourning women, the professional mourners, to come and raise a lament over what is happening to Judah (9:17-18). Professional mourners are largely unknown to us in modern Western society, but I remember seeing something like this in Morocco years ago. A procession of people came up the street where we were in Tangier, weeping and wailing. Then we saw a box being carried by several people and realized it was a coffin. The procession lasted only a few minutes, but everyone in the area stopped what they were doing, came to their doorways and stood at attention as it passed. They honored the dead.

That experience helps me picture Jeremiah's words. But here the mourning is not simply for someone who has already died. Verse 20 tells the women to teach their daughters to wail and each woman to teach her neighbor a song of mourning. This grief is going to extend beyond the present moment. Another generation needs to learn the lament because the consequences of Judah's rebellion will continue. This is not a brief interruption after which everything returns to normal. Judah is in deep trouble.

Then Jeremiah gives death an almost terrifying personality: "For death has come up through our windows; it has entered our palaces" (9:21). Windows and palaces should represent security, but death enters both. Children disappear from the streets and young men from the public squares. Finally the bodies will lie in the open field "like the sheaf after the reaper, but no one will gather them" (9:22). There is no attempt here to make judgment pretty. Jeremiah wants his hearers to understand where their choices are taking them.

And yet this chapter does not finish there. After deceit, judgment, exile and mourning, we arrive at one of the great statements in Jeremiah about what actually matters. The question changes from what Judah has trusted wrongly to what is genuinely worth having confidence in.

5. The Hope of Choice — Verses 23-26

I'm amazed at verses 23 and 24. God names three things people have always valued: wisdom, strength and riches. None of them is inherently wrong. Wisdom can be enormously useful. Strength can accomplish wonderful things. Riches can provide for our families, enable generosity and accomplish much good. The problem comes when any of them becomes the thing in which we boast, the thing that gives us our identity or the thing we trust to save us.

Strength is easy to admire. We see it in sport, in military power and in politics. Wisdom can produce intellectual dignity, but it can also move rapidly into intellectual superiority and pride. Riches can be a wonderful provision, but Proverbs warns that wealth can make itself wings and fly away (Proverbs 23:5). When money becomes our security, we desperately cling

to it, and what began as a gift can become the idol of greed and self-centeredness. Wisdom, strength and riches can all be useful to a person and to a society, but without God at the center, they are idols in the making.

No wonder Jeremiah warns us not to boast in them. But we can boast. God does not simply say, “Don’t boast.” He gives us something infinitely better: “Let the one who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me” (9:24). There is the hope of choice. We can put our confidence in all the things that eventually fail us, or we can know the One who is above them all.

That’s what Jeremiah is saying. Boast that you “understand and know Me.” And then notice what God tells us about himself: “I am the LORD who exercises mercy, justice, and righteousness on the earth; for I delight in these things” (9:24). Knowing God changes the way we live because we begin to value what he values. We practice justice, kindness and righteousness because these reveal the character of the God we have come to know.

There is also an important Hebrew word here: *chesed*. It can be translated kindness, mercy, lovingkindness or covenant love. Yet kindness does not mean ignoring evil. If God never judges sin, oppression or people committed to harming others, that would not be kindness. God’s *chesed* and his justice are not enemies. Jeremiah puts mercy, justice and righteousness together because all three belong to the character of God.

Jewish Insight

Radak, the 12th-century Jewish commentator, connected knowing God with imitating his ways by practicing kindness, justice and righteousness. I appreciate the connection, but I want to press the word “know” further. Knowing my wife is not the same as imitating her. Knowing about a sports hero might lead me to imitate him, his batting stance or the way he wears his cleats, but that doesn’t mean I know him. Knowing a person means getting up close and personal—knowing what brings that person joy, what causes sadness, what matters to them and what they love. Hosea says, “Let us press on to know the LORD” (Hosea 6:3). Knowing is not merely knowing about. It’s personal. It’s relationship.

The chapter ends with a surprising comparison. God places Judah alongside Egypt, Edom, Ammon, Moab and the peoples of the desert and says that judgment is coming on those who are “circumcised and yet uncircumcised” (9:25–26). Physical circumcision was the covenant sign given to Abraham and his descendants, but Jeremiah makes it clear that possessing the outward sign is not enough. Judah may be circumcised in the flesh while remaining “uncircumcised of heart.”

This is not a rejection of circumcision itself. It is a warning against trusting the external sign while ignoring the spiritual reality to which it points. Moses had already told Israel, “Circumcise your heart” (Deuteronomy 10:16), and later promised that the LORD would circumcise the hearts of his people so that they would love him (Deuteronomy 30:6). Jeremiah has already used similar language about uncircumcised ears (Jeremiah 6:10). The issue is whether the heart belongs to God.

Paul picks up precisely this theme centuries later: “He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit” (Romans 2:29). Paul didn’t invent that idea. He is speaking from within the prophetic tradition of Moses and Jeremiah. External Jewish identity matters, but it cannot substitute for knowing God. That fits the whole argument of Jeremiah 9: Torah, circumcision, wisdom, strength and riches can all become false confidences if they take the place of the God to whom they should point.

Life Application

What do you boast about? That’s a fairly confronting question. Perhaps it’s education, accomplishments, position, physical strength, financial security, religious knowledge or even the family from which you come. Some of those things are genuinely worth appreciating, but Jeremiah asks us to consider where our confidence finally rests. Wisdom can fail us. Strength diminishes. Riches can make themselves wings and fly away. Even religious externals can become substitutes for the God we claim to worship.

God gives us something better: “Let the one who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me” (9:24). Knowing God is not passing an examination about him. It’s relationship. And that relationship should increasingly produce what God says he delights in: *chesed*, justice and righteousness. If I say I know God, then over time the things he values ought to become the things I value.

Conclusion

Jeremiah 9 began in tears. Society was breaking down because truth itself had become negotiable. Neighbors could not trust neighbors, brothers betrayed brothers, and people had trained themselves to lie. God explained why judgment was coming: his people had forsaken Torah, refused to listen to his voice and followed other gods. The professional mourners would soon have plenty to mourn.

But the chapter does not leave us only with tears. Jeremiah gives us a choice about where we place our confidence. Not ultimately in wisdom, strength, riches or even the outward signs of belonging to God’s people. Our confidence is in knowing the Lord—the God who delights in *chesed*, justice and righteousness.

That is the question Jeremiah leaves with us: Do we merely know about God, or do we know him?

What’s Next?

Jeremiah 9 has exposed false confidence. Chapter 10 completes the four-part sermon that began back in chapter 7: false worship, false prophets, false confidence and finally false gods. Jeremiah turns to the idols of the nations and almost makes fun of them. A craftsman cuts down a tree, decorates it with silver and gold, fastens it with nails so it won’t fall over—and

then people worship it. Jeremiah compares such an idol to “a scarecrow in a cucumber field” (Jeremiah 10:5).

The contrast could hardly be greater: “But the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King” (Jeremiah 10:10).

Next: *Jeremiah 10 — False Gods*

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