

Jeremiah 13 — Who Are You Wearing?

Lesson Summary

Jeremiah 13 is filled with pictures, beginning with a piece of clothing. God tells Jeremiah to buy a linen waistband, wear it, and then hide it until it is ruined. The object lesson represents Israel and Judah, whom God intended to cling to him as a waistband clings to its wearer. They were to be for his renown, praise, and glory, but they would not listen. From there the pictures become increasingly dark: drunkenness, approaching darkness, captivity, childbirth, prostitution, and chaff blown by the wind. Yet underneath the severe language is the grief of God and his prophet. Judgment is coming, but God takes no pleasure in the ruin of the people he created to display his glory.

Big Idea

The question of Jeremiah 13 is not simply, “What are you wearing?” but “Who are you wearing?” Israel was God's garment. The ruined waistband becomes a picture of what happens when God's people refuse to listen to him. Yet even here, beyond the immediate horizon of judgment, Jeremiah will eventually show us that God has not abandoned his purpose. What his people have spoiled, God intends finally to restore.

Who Are You Wearing?

Award nights in Hollywood and Bollywood are the stuff of red carpets and glamour. Celebrities prepare for days and hours ahead of their showcase appearance, work their way through the traffic, and finally arrive amid the floodlights and cameras. A microphone is thrust toward them and the questions begin: “Did you enjoy making that movie?” “What was it like working with so-and-so?” Then comes the question that has little to do with acting but a great deal to do with promotion: “Who are you wearing?” That's glam-speak for, “What famous designer is responsible for the dress, suit, shoes, jewelry, and everything else we're looking at?” Nobody simply says, “Hey, that's a nice suit.” The clothing is supposed to tell us something about its maker.

Jeremiah 13 begins with clothing, and in a sense the same question is being asked. God tells Jeremiah to go shopping and buy a linen waistband. I don't think we should picture an ordinary belt, nor do I think “undergarment” quite captures what is going on. Verse 11 is important to understanding the object lesson. This garment was designed to cling to the wearer, but it was also visible. It was decorative and perhaps functional, able to carry coins or small tools. Linen also had priestly associations, which makes the choice interesting because Jeremiah was the son of a priest and therefore qualified for priestly service, although God had called him instead to the prophetic task. Whatever else we say about the garment, God intends people to notice it because it is going to become a living sermon.

God tells Jeremiah, “Go and buy yourself a linen waistband and put it around your waist, but do not put it in water” (13:1). Rashi (the medieval Jewish rabbi from France, and one of the top scholars in all of Jewish history) understood the instruction about water as allowing the sweat of Jeremiah's journey to cling to the garment, but I'm not convinced. The more important clue comes when God himself explains the symbolism: “For as the waistband clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole household of Israel and the whole household of Judah cling to Me” (13:11). The

waistband represents the Jewish people, and that changes the question entirely. It isn't primarily about what Israel is wearing. Israel is what God is wearing.

Renown, Praise and Glory

God says that Israel and Judah were intended to cling to him so that they might be “for Me a people, for renown, for praise and for glory” (13:11). Those three ideas deserve attention: *shem*, name or renown; *tehila*, praise; and *tiferet*, glory or honor. This same triad appears in Deuteronomy 26:19, where Israel is told that God will set his people high above the nations “for praise, fame, and honor,” and that they will be a consecrated people to the LORD. That's the purpose of the cloth, and that's the purpose of Israel. We were to be praise, fame, and honor—but not for ourselves. The garment is visible because God's people were intended to make something visible about God.

That is why I turn the red-carpet question around. Who is wearing whom? This is not Israel's clothing; this is Israel as clothing. God intended the nations to look at his people and learn something about him. Billy Crystal used to play a character he created named Fernando on *Saturday Night Live*, telling people, “You look *mahvelous*!” The joke was about appearance, but borrow it for a moment. God wanted the nations to look at him, look at the people who bore his name, and say, in effect, “God, you look marvelous!” He wanted Babylon and Assyria and the surrounding nations to see his justice, mercy, holiness, goodness, and faithfulness through the people who clung to him. Instead, Israel damaged the reputation of the God it had been called to display. What you wear says something about you, and God's garment had become ruined.

Euphrates or Parath?

There is an interesting geographical question in the story. God tells Jeremiah to take the waistband to *Perath*, often translated “the Euphrates,” and hide it there in a crevice of the rock. Later he is told to return and retrieve it. A literal journey to the Euphrates raises a practical difficulty. From Jeremiah's location, that is an enormous journey—roughly a thousand kilometers, depending on the route—and the repeated trip would require months rather than a few days. The object lesson itself does not require such a journey, and I find persuasive the suggestion of commentators who associate *Perath* here with nearby Parath rather than the distant Euphrates. The similarity of the names allows the prophetic association while a nearby location makes good sense of Jeremiah actually carrying out the enacted sermon.

Wherever we finally locate the hiding place, what Jeremiah finds when he returns is unmistakable. The beautiful garment has been spoiled and is “totally worthless” (13:7). God then explains the picture: “Just so will I destroy the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem” (13:9). The people who were supposed to cling to God have stubbornly followed their own hearts and gone after other gods. The tragedy is not merely that Israel has made a mess of itself. God made this people for His purposes, to carry His reputation among the nations, and they have failed Him. The waistband was created to cling, but the people “did not listen” (13:11).

The Story Is Not Finished

There is hope, because there is always hope somewhere in Jeremiah's prophetic horizon, but we must be careful about rushing to it. Jeremiah 33:8–9 deliberately returns to the language of Chapter 13. God promises a day when he will cleanse His people from their iniquity and pardon their sin,

and Jerusalem “will be to Me a name of joy, praise and glory before all the nations of the earth.” There they are again: *shem*, *tehila*, and *tiferet*. What Israel failed to be in Jeremiah 13, God says His people will one day become. His purpose has not disappeared simply because His people have failed to fulfill it.

But don't turn to Chapter 33 too quickly. I watched *The Man in the High Castle*, a television series built around the imagined world that might have resulted if Germany and Japan had won World War II. It's long, confusing, and violent, and I'm not necessarily recommending it, although I enjoy sitting with my wife and trying to work out what just happened. One of the characters, an antiques dealer from California, is criticized for being “so American,” meaning relentlessly optimistic. We can do the same thing spiritually. We saw Russia invade Ukraine in 2022 and say, “It'll be over soon.” We see the bank balance going down and say, “She'll be right, mate.” Sometimes optimism is simply our refusal to look seriously at the warning signs. Living as a Pollyanna is not a healthy way to live.

Reading Jeremiah 33 before allowing Jeremiah 13 to do its work can become optimism on steroids. Yes, God will have His way. Yes, restoration is coming. But first we have to experience the pain of God's sadness. Grace is not made more wonderful by pretending judgment isn't serious. The ruined waistband must remain ruined for a while. Israel must understand what has been lost, and we as readers have to feel that loss before the later promises carry their proper weight.

A Nation Full of Drunkenness

Beginning in verse 12, the picture changes from clothing to wine jars. Everybody knows that a wine jar is supposed to be filled with wine, so the people respond to Jeremiah's announcement almost sarcastically: “Do we not very well know that every jug is to be filled with wine?” It's as if they are saying, “Of course we know that. What's your point, Jeremiah?” God's answer is that the people themselves are about to be filled with drunkenness—kings, priests, prophets, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The leadership that should have been clear-headed and faithful is pictured as staggering toward destruction.

The language that follows is severe: “I will not show pity nor be sorry nor have compassion so as not to destroy them” (13:14). Does that mean God has ceased to be pitiful, merciful, and compassionate? Of course not. Those qualities belong to His character. But Babylon is coming as God's instrument of judgment, and Babylon will show no pity, mercy, or compassion. Israel has treated God's patience as though it were permission to continue indefinitely. It isn't. There comes a point when the consequences arrive, and the God who has repeatedly warned His people allows those consequences to fall.

Give Glory to God

Then Jeremiah says, “Listen and give heed, do not be haughty, for the LORD has spoken. Give glory to the LORD your God, before He brings darkness” (13:15–16). We have encountered that phrase before, and it is important to hear it correctly. “Give glory to God” does not mean, “Do this and Babylon won't come.” The national judgment is settled. The phrase reminds me of Joshua 7:19, when Joshua tells Achan, “My son, I implore you, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done.” Achan's confession did not undo the consequences of what he had done. It acknowledged the truth of God's judgment.

Think of a guilty and sentenced man approaching the gallows. He cannot now make the sentence disappear, but he can acknowledge his wrongdoing and agree that the judgment rendered against him is just. He can make peace with eternity before he enters it. That's the force I hear in Jeremiah's appeal. Darkness is coming; indeed, deep darkness is coming. Give glory to God, not as a technique to prevent the exile, but as an acknowledgment that God has judged rightly and as an opportunity to come into peace with Him before the judgment arrives.

The Tears Behind the Judgment

Then comes one of the most revealing verses in the chapter: “But if you will not listen to it, my soul will sob in secret for such pride; and my eyes will bitterly weep and flow down with tears, because the flock of the LORD has been taken captive” (13:17). Weeping appears three times in that single verse. Jeremiah has been called the weeping prophet, and here we see why. He isn't standing at a safe distance announcing punishment with satisfaction or anger. The message he has to deliver breaks his heart. He knows that the judgment is deserved, but knowing that doesn't make the captivity less painful.

This also fits what we saw in Chapter 12. There Jeremiah complained to God about suffering and injustice, only to discover that God Himself lamented over his beloved inheritance. Now Jeremiah shares that grief. There is a difference between announcing judgment because we enjoy being right about somebody else's sin and announcing judgment while grieving over those who will experience it. Jeremiah's tears tell us something important about the heart of the prophet. Truth without tears can easily become self-righteousness. Jeremiah speaks hard truth, but he does so as one whose eyes overflow because “the flock of the LORD has been taken captive.” (13:17)

The Final Spin Cycle

From verse 18 onward, the chapter spirals downward. I call it the final spin cycle of the dryer. Kings and queens come down from their thrones. Cities are shut up. Judah is carried into exile—indeed, “wholly carried into exile” (13:19). Exile has been hovering over Jeremiah's preaching from the opening chapter, but now the word is unavoidable. You are leaving. You will not be here. Pack up. There is nothing you can do to save the nation from what is coming.

If Judah asks, “Why have these things happened to me?” God answers plainly: “Because of the magnitude of your iniquity” (13:22). Jeremiah isn't presenting the Babylonian exile as an unfortunate geopolitical accident. Judah has persistently refused to listen. The striking comparison in verse 23—whether an Ethiopian can change his skin or a leopard its spots—describes how deeply established the people's patterns have become. “Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil.” Sin has become habitual. Choices have become character, and character has produced consequences.

The chapter closes with increasingly humiliating pictures, including the exposure of Jerusalem's skirts, her spiritual prostitution, and finally the question, “How long will you remain unclean?” (13:27) Taken as a whole, I count seven major images running through the chapter: the waistcloth, the drunkards, the traveler overtaken by darkness, the captive flock, the woman in travail, the prostitute, and the chaff scattered by the desert wind. They aren't seven disconnected sermon illustrations. Together they portray the unraveling of a people who were designed to cling to God but repeatedly refused to listen to him.

The God Behind the Garment

That takes us back to the waistband. From the beginning, God's intention was for a relationship with the Jewish people. "I made the whole household of Israel and the whole household of Judah cling to Me." His people were meant to be so closely identified with Him that the nations would see something of God's character through them. The terrible phrase at the end of verse 11 is simply, "but they did not listen." That refusal explains much of what follows. The garment did not ruin itself accidentally; the people persistently rejected the purpose for which God had called them.

To this day, God longs to be in relationship with His people. Mercy is not a reluctant afterthought for the Lord. Yet mercy does not mean that choices cease to have consequences. Numbers 32:23 warns, "Be sure your sin will find you out." Jeremiah 13 makes that truth visible. The waistband hidden and ruined, the staggering drunkards, the approaching darkness, the captive flock, and the scattered chaff all say that persistent refusal eventually produces consequences. But the very grief running through the chapter tells us that judgment is not what God delights in. The God who weeps over what his people have become is the same God who will later promise to cleanse, pardon, restore, and finally make them what he intended them to be.

Takeaways

1. God intended Israel to display his character before the nations. Israel was called to cling to God and become for him a name, praise, and glory. God's people never exist merely for themselves.
2. Repeated refusal to listen to the Lord has consequences. National judgment is unavoidable. I need to heed God's invitation to acknowledge His justice and return personally to Him.
3. Judgment does not mean that God has stopped caring. I can join Jeremiah and the Almighty in grieving for the people who are being judged and hear something of God's own grief.
4. Restoration becomes more wonderful when we understand what needs to be restored. Mercy triumphs over judgment, but I need to experience the weight of God's justice and let that truth take root in me.

Memory Verse

"For as the waistband clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole household of Israel and the whole household of Judah cling to Me," declares the LORD, "that they might be for Me a people, for renown, for praise and for glory; but they did not listen."

Jeremiah 13:11

WATCH

Watch the original live teaching of Jeremiah 13: [Jeremiah 13 — Who Are You Wearing?](#)

WHAT'S NEXT?

Jeremiah 13 leaves us with ruined clothing, darkness, tears, and the certainty of exile. Chapter 14 changes the picture but not the seriousness. This time the land itself tells the story. Judah is experiencing a devastating drought. There is no water, no rain, no grass, and no vegetation. Nobles, servants, farmers, wild animals, and the land itself suffer together. Sin and judgment are not abstract theological ideas when the wells are empty and the ground is cracked.

The drought drives Jeremiah to prayer, and something significant happens to his language. He doesn't stand outside the nation and say, "They have sinned." He says, "Our iniquities testify against us," "our apostasies have been many," and "we have sinned against You." Yet God's response is difficult: the national judgment will not be prayed away. Jeremiah must wrestle with the difference between the unavoidable consequences facing Judah as a people and the continuing responsibility of individuals to respond faithfully to God. And once again the prophet discovers that intercession does not always produce the answer the intercessor wants.

Next: Jeremiah 14 — Drought Then, Storms Today

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