

# THE SERMON NOTEBOOK

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Jeremiah's America - # 9

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SUBJECT: FROM SADNESS TO JOY

TITLE: THE SADDEST WORDS

TEXT: JEREMIAH 9:20-25

INTRODUCTION. We have all received news that made a lasting impression on us. I am talking about the kind of news you remember for a long time. We have fond memories that fill us with joy and bad memories that fill our hearts with sadness. As an athlete and sports fan, some of my highest highs and lowest lows have been associated with my favorite athletes or teams. I remember watching a winter sports show that included in the introduction the words, "The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." The words, "the thrill of victory" accompanied a skier crossing the finish line. The words, "the agony of defeat" were played over footage of a ski jumper who missed his landing and flipped over and over before stopping all sprawled out in the snow. I learned that people around the world were concerned about the welfare of the injured skier. Years later, this man was interviewed on a telecast.

I remember when Ted Williams returned from his second war and stepped up to the plate and swung the bat as though he had never missed a day. He had missed a lot more than a day. He missed five years flying combat missions during World War II, and later in Korea. My friend, Bob Moore was in the Marines and had the privilege of watching pilots make practice runs. He said that everyone knew Ted Williams' plane because it was the one that came in the lowest and stayed the longest. The Splendid Splinter had hit .408 before going to war, and he returned home later and hit .388.

I used to sit up with my grandfather and listen to the St. Louis Cardinal games. My National League sports hero was Stan Musial - Stan the Man. I was not only a baseball fan. I was thrilled to watch Arnold Palmer play golf, Rocky Marciano box, and Bob Cousy or Bill Russell play basketball. I will never forget going to visit someone in a hospital and discovering that the Baltimore Colts were playing the New York Giants for the championship. That was the first time I saw Johnny Unitas play. A few modern day quarterbacks have surpassed his record, but no one has ever surpassed Johnny Unitas.

Not all my memories were positive. I remember when one of my favorite baseball players, Pete Rose, was denied entrance into the Baseball Hall of Fame because of gambling. I can remember other athletes who have been disgraced, but there is one moment in sports that stands out in my mind as perhaps the saddest story in American sports. Following the infamous Black Sox scandal in which a number of White Sox players conspired to throw the world series. Shoeless Joe Jackson refused to participate in the shameless and disgraceful endeavor. In fact, Shoeless Joe Jackson played his heart out to try to win in spite of what his teammates were doing to throw the series, but

because he did not turn in his friends he was disgraced and banned for life from the game he loved. The news spread across the nation and around the world. Now picture this little boy standing before Joe Jackson - with tears streaming down his face, he says, "Say it ain't so, Joe, say it ain't so." What sad words those were.

We can recall good news and sad news from war. There is Pearl Harbor, and then there is VE Day and the surrender of Japan. There is the shame and debacle that was Viet Nam, and then there was Desert Storm. There was nine-eleven, and there is Afghanistan and Iraq. We could go on and on, but I would like to move on to some of the saddest words I have ever read, and these words are found in the Bible.

## I. THE BIBLE IS FILLED WITH SAD WORDS.

### A. Let Us Recall a Few Statements from the Old Testament.

#### 1. First, there is, "Rachel weeping for her children."

Listen to these words from the weeping prophet: "This is what the Lord says: A voice was heard in Ramah, a lament with bitter weeping— **Rachel weeping for her children**, refusing to be comforted for her children because they are no more" (Jer 31:15). I never read these words that I do not sense that there is a sadness in them which I cannot fathom, yet I am saddened by them. And then, I read the next two verses: "This is what the Lord says: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for the reward for your work will come— [this is] the Lord's declaration— and your children will return from the enemy's land. There is hope for your future— [this is] the Lord's declaration— and your children will return to their own territory" (Jer 31:16-17).

Jeremiah is the prophet, but the words belong to the Lord, so they are spoken not only with conviction, but also with authority. Judah would be conquered and the masses deported. That is the message that prompted the response, "**Rachel weeping for her children.**" Rachel was the beloved wife of Jacob whose name was changed to Israel. She was also the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. They would not know joy for a long time after the captivity began, with three deportations of the people into captivity by Babylon - in 606, 597, and 586 B. C. There was good news, however. At the end of seventy years a remnant would be returned to the Land of Promise, the land of the covenant.

#### 2. Then, there is, "Tell it not in Gath" (Micah 1:10).

Micah was one of the four great Eighth Century B. C. Prophets; Amos and Hosea in Israel, the Northern Kingdom; and Isaiah and Micah in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Amos and Hosea delivered God's message in which He stressed His love for His people and highlighted the fact that He was a longsuffering God. They has been blessed but they turned from God to idols. God had warned them, but they refused to listen and return to Him. God had punished them, but they became

more and more stubborn. Finally, The Lord told Amos to deliver this shocking message:

“I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a burning stick snatched from a fire, yet you did not return to Me— the Lord’s declaration. Therefore, Israel, that is what I will do to you, and since I will do that to you, Israel, prepare to meet your God!” (Amos 4:11-12).

Micah joined Isaiah and pleading with the people of Judah to learn from God’s dealings with Israel, repent, and follow the Lord. They persisted in rebellion in spite of the fact that two of the greatest prophets in history were delivering God’s message. They did not repent, so God sent Jeremiah with a final warning. The time is running out on Judah. They were facing a judgment they could not imagine, and it was just around the corner. Here is God’s word through Jeremiah:

“Has a nation [ever] exchanged its gods? (but they were not gods!) Yet My people have exchanged their Glory for useless idols. Be horrified at this, heavens; be shocked and utterly appalled. [This is] the Lord’s declaration. For My people have committed a double evil: They have abandoned Me, the fountain of living water, and dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jer 2:11-13, HCSB).

These people did not simply slip up any more than they slipped away. They rebelled! They crossed the line with their eyes wide open. Their sin had been great, and their punishment would be great. In fact, more than one hundred years before the city state of Babylon began its conquests, Micah described a devastation so great, so horrible, that he finally exclaimed, “**Tell it not in Gath.**” Gath was one of the five Philistine cities that made up the Philistine Pentapolis. Each city had its own king and its own army. They combined their forces when they fought a serious foe. Any message of judgment against Israel would be welcomed in Gath, Gaza, Ekron, Ashelon, and Ashdod. In fact, this message, if announced in Gath would cause a frenzied celebration, much like we see in some of the film from the Middle East today when there is an attack against Israel.

## B. Now, Think of Some Sad Experiences in History.

### 1. The saddest of all is the Fall.

Paradise Lost! Adam and Eve lived in the only true paradise this world has ever known. They would have lived, and they would have lived in the Garden of Eden as long as they obeyed God. They sinned and they died spiritually, and in time they died physically. They were driven out of Eden and not permitted to return. This is really sad. The Good news is that God promised to send a Savior.

### 2. Moses sinned and was not permitted to enter the Land of Promise.

Dr. W. W. Stevens’ Old Testament Class at Mississippi College was invited by the rabbi to visit Temple Beth Israel in Jackson, Mississippi. The Rabbi had spoken to our class. I found myself

talking with one of the Jewish men and for some reason we mentioned Moses. I asked him if he agreed that Moses was the most humble of men. He reminded me that Moses had struck the stone when God told him to speak to it. He had also killed an Egyptian when he was forty years old. Moses may have felt completely justified, considering his responsibilities, but when he sinned he paid a horrible price. The man God sent to lead His people out of Egypt, the man who led them across the Red Sea, the Man to whom God gave the Law, the man who led them during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. This is sad, but God showed mercy to Moses when he permitted him to stand on a mountain and look over into the Promised Land.

### 3. Samson was the man who might have been.

I grew up around some very strong men and for years I have seen a lot of power-lifters. I may not be the only one who remembers a man named Paul Anderson. Paul Anderson was called the strongest man in the world for many years. I have seen him on TV when he pumped 250 pounds with each hand - a 250 pound dumbbell. He also lifted a full grown elephant by getting under the platform on which the elephant stood and with his legs, lifted the elephant and the platform. Paul Anderson was a committed Christian who worked with young people, much as the power team does today in schools around the country.

There was a man who was even stronger than any of these. As far as we know, he never worked out, he never took steroids, and he never competed with other strong men. Of course, you know I am talking about Samson. Someone captured the sadness of Samson's life with these words: "The man who might have been."

### 4. Picture David when Nathan declared, "Thou art the man!"

We could spend hours talking about David, but we all know about David's sin with Bathsheba. Do you remember when God sent Nathan the prophet to confront the king with his sin? He pointed his bony finger in the king's face and declared, "Thou art the man!"

## C. Now, Look to the New Testament.

### 1. The Passion of Christ is the greatest example.

America was shocked and amazed by the Mel Gibson movie, THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST. No matter how many times we had read the story of the trials, the abuse, the flogging, and the crucifixion, we were not prepared for the incredibly shocking portrayal of the indescribable suffering of our Lord. There can be nothing as sad as the way human beings treated their Creator when He was on the earth. Thank God, the story does not end here. Remember that great resurrection morning? Remember all those appearances? Remember the promise? Jesus is coming again, and when He returns no one will be slapping Him, no one will place a crown of thorns on His head, and no one will flog Him, or crucify Him. He is returning as King of kings and Lord of lords.

2. Peter's denial of Christ was a low mark in the New Testament.

Peter was the last person you would expect to deny Jesus. He had declared his commitment and loyalty to His Lord, only to hear Jesus prophesy that before the cock crowed twice, Peter would deny him three times. When the cock crowed, Peter went out and wept bitterly. What a sad picture! But the story does not end there. Simon Peter would indeed become the rock Jesus knew he would be.

## II. JEREMIAH, THE WEEPING PROPHET, OFTEN DELIVERED SAD NEWS.

### A. Jeremiah's Call Foretold a Life of Tears.

1. God singled him out for his ministry before he was born.
2. Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet.
3. He wrote the book of Lamentations.
4. Jeremiah was hated by the people.
5. He was hated by the king.
6. He was hated by prophets.
7. He was thrown into a dungeon to die a miserable death.

### B. Jeremiah Delivered Some of the Saddest Messages Every Heard.

1. First, let us look at Jeremiah 2:5-8.

“Here is what the Lord says: **What fault did your fathers find in Me** that they went so far from Me, **followed worthless idols, and became worthless themselves?....** I brought you to a fertile land to eat its fruit and bounty, but after you entered, you **defiled My land; you made My inheritance detestable. *The priests quit asking: Where is the Lord?*** The experts in the law no longer knew Me, and the rulers rebelled against Me. **The prophets prophesied by Baal** and followed useless idols” (Jer 2:5-8).

2. Now, let us look at Jeremiah 2:21-22.

“**I planted you, a choice vine** from the very best seed. **How then could you turn into a degenerate, foreign vine?** Even if you wash with lye and use a great amount

of soap, the stain of your guilt is still in front of Me. [This is] the Lord God's declaration" (Jer 2:21-22, HCSB)

3. The next passage helps to explain Jeremiah's lamentations.

"For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is gaining profit unjustly. **From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.** They have treated My people's brokenness superficially, **claiming: Peace, peace, when there is no peace**" (Jer 6:13-14, HCSB)

4. If anything the message becomes even sadder as we look at 9:20-22.

"Now hear the word of the Lord, you women. Pay attention to the word of His mouth. **Teach your daughters a lament and one another a dirge, for *Death has climbed through our windows; it has entered our fortresses, cutting off children from the streets, young men from the squares.*** Speak as follows: This is what the Lord says: Human corpses will fall like manure on the surface of the field, like newly cut grain after the reaper with no one to gather [it]" (Jer 9:20-22).

5. There is little wonder that Jeremiah was the weeping prophet.

Let me remind you that when God called Jeremiah to deliver the "Thus saith the word of the Lord," he told him that he was never to be married (an OT type or portrait of Jesus in this respect, as we see in Isaiah 53 - "He was cut off out of the land of the living, and who shall declare His generation?"). God did not command Jeremiah not to get married to set a precedent for those who would take an oath of celibacy centuries later. The simple fact was that God was dealing mercifully with Jeremiah. The prophet would never want to see a wife and children go through what Judah was facing. At the same time, to remain childless, with no one to declare your generation, was like one had never lived.

C. Now, Let Us See if We Can Get a Glimpse of America in Jeremiah.

1. It makes me sad to see America is changing its God, just like Judah.

Like Judah, millions of Americans have exchanged its God for a god that does not exist, a god that is not profitable, a god that cannot hear, see, or speak. America was established on New Testament principles. I thank the Lord that people like David Barton of WALL BUILDERS are reproducing books and documents that children in the classroom almost never see. For one example, George Washington's farewell address has been edited to leave out any reference to God.

America has compounded its rejection of the true God by following false gods. Many people in education, the news media, the entertainment industry, politics, and the judicial system have actively opposed Christianity while promoting (or giving a pass to) Islam, Eastern Mysticism, Indian Shamanism, witchcraft, and a whole plethora of New Age deities, including the "force."

2. Rejection of God has been relentless.
  - a. America entered the post-Christian era of its history around 1935.
  - b. Evolution replaced creation in the classroom.
  - c. Humanism supplanted Christianity in the media.
  - d. Moral relativism replaced the Ten Commandments in society.
  - e. As in ancient Judah, we are surrounded by people with unclean lips.
  - f. Politicians are often corrupt.
  - g. Greed and covetousness influence every aspect of our society.
  - h. God's Day is no longer sacred to many Americans.
  - i. God's name is not holy to America today.
  - j. God's Word is no longer honored in America.
  - k. Courts have become more and more anti-Christian.
3. America may well be more guilty than Jeremiah's Judah.
  - a. Americans are sinning against a greater light.
  - b. Jesus has come and shed His blood for our salvation.
  - c. He set down the greatest system of ethics the world has ever known.
  - d. We have the New Testament to instruct us.
  - e. We have the Holy Spirit to guide us.
  - f. We have centuries of Christian history to convince us.
4. It makes me sad to see price we are paying for rejecting God.
  - a. America is entertained with filthy language.

- b. Pornography has spread like cancer through our society.
- c. Many professing Christians are addicted to pornography.
- d. The family is in trouble in America today.
- e. Children are paying a terrible price for the sins of their parents.
- f. Some 45 million unborn babies have been slaughtered by abortionists.
- g. Homosexuality is spreading like wildfire across America.

### III. BOTH SADNESS AND JOY ARE OFTEN DETERMINED BY OUR CHOICES.

#### A. There Is a Difference Between Happiness and Joy.

Happiness is from the old English word meaning happenstance. Circumstances can effect one's emotions, and circumstances change from day to day, and from week to week. A young lady leaves home thinking all is well with the world. She has a husband and two small children. She has a good job, the family is financially secure, and they are living the good life. The phone rings and her world falls apart. Her husband has been cheating on her. A man comes in from home early and discovers that his wife is unfaithful. Circumstances have changed and the happiness is destroyed.

The joy God gives to those who trust Him and obey Him is not so fickle. I am reminded of something I wrote in my commentary on Philippians, UNDEFEATED: FINDING PEACE IN A WORLD FULL OF TROUBLE (p. 24).

“Millions are seeking peace today, but they will never find it anywhere except in the Prince of Peace. Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker or read the words on a church sign: NO JESUS NO PEACE; KNOW JESUS, KNOW PEACE. Let me try to adapt that....there is:

“No joy without peace,  
No peace without grace,  
No grace without Jesus.”

Joy is neither created nor destroyed by circumstances. Joy is compromised by sin, as David discovered. He prayed that God would forgive his sin and return the joy of his salvation. God does not want you to be sad. He wants you to have joy, and He wants your joy to be full and complete.

#### B. A Lot of Suffering and Sadness Is Directly Related to Choices.

1. Immorality is a choice that brings sad results.
2. Alcohol is a choice that produces sad results.
3. Drug use is a choice that yields sad hearts and destroys lives.
4. Dishonesty is a choice that pays sad dividends.
5. Violence is a choice that yields a sad harvest.
6. Satan pays in counterfeit bills (R. G. Lee, PAY DAY SOME DAY)

C. At the Risk of Over-simplification, Joy is a Choice.

Robert Frost understood this when he wrote the wonderful poem:

### THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to war,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

CONCLUSION. Jeremiah was sent by the Lord to confront Judah with her sin and rebellion, her immorality, violence, greed, idolatry and all that is associated with it. Judah had a golden opportunity to repent and experience revival. God had not only sent Jeremiah, He had a king on the throne who actively sought revival for the land. Judah half-heartedly followed King Josiah, but when he was killed by Pharaoh Necho on the Plains of Megiddo in 608 B. C., the people quickly turned again to false gods, and when Jeremiah pleaded with them to repent and turn back to the Lord they persecuted him.

America desperately needs a revival today. Countless pastors, evangelists, and lay leaders are praying for revival today. Southern Baptist Convention president Bobby Welch has traveled to all fifty states, challenging Southern Baptist churches to make a commitment to win and baptize one million people in one year. He talked with us at the recent (February, 2005) board of trustees meeting for LifeWay Christian Resources about this commitment. He actually moved to Nashville for three months to prepare for the annual convention of Southern Baptists in his effort to keep this goal before the churches.

Let us pray that this will be the spark that will ignite revival fires across this nation. Pray that God is giving us another opportunity. Pray that we will choose to reject the false gods of our time and embrace the true and living God.