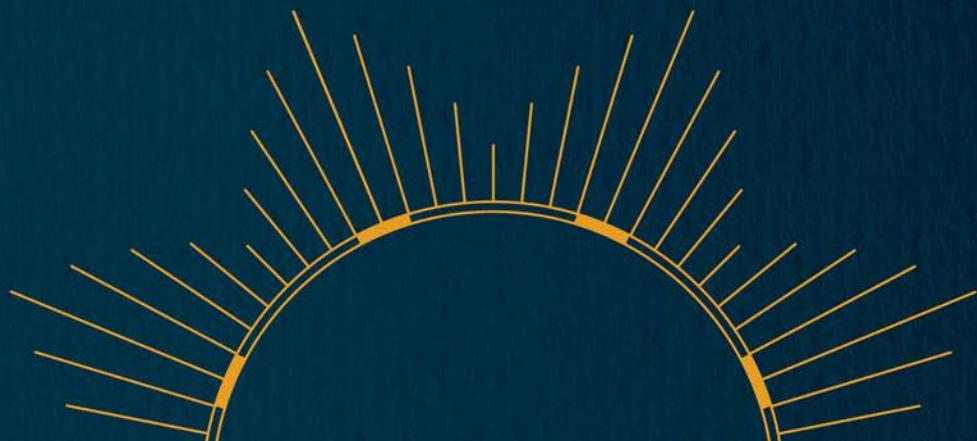




THE MESSAGE®
*PRAYERFUL
READING
BIBLE*

JEREMIAH & LAMENTATIONS

EUGENE H. PETERSON



It's wonderful to witness more and more people incorporating the *lectio divina* into their devotional lives, moving from *reading* the biblical text in search of revelation to *prayerful exploration* of its message, in search of a personal, transformative encounter. Eugene Peterson was one of the great modern champions of this approach. His *Message* translation of the Bible and the *lectio divina* complement one another like fish and chips! This is a resource to revitalize the prayer lives of thousands.

PETE GREIG, cofounder of 24-7 Prayer International and senior pastor of Emmaus Rd church

A stunning and beautiful guide that understands, after all, that the only way to come to the Holy Bible is prayerfully. *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible* meets us there, affirming our astonished desire to stop, open our hearts, and hear well from God. Thoughtful, kind, and challenging, this Bible lights the way to that deeper walk. What we'll gain along the way can't be measured, and that's just one aspect that will make the journey so special.

PATRICIA RAYBON, author of *I Told the Mountain to Move*

I was taught to read Scripture in order to: understand God, apply his truth to my life, and teach it to others. But *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible* takes it deeper: to not just understand God but meet with him. We need wise guides on how to engage in the spiritual reading of Scripture, and this is as good as I've seen. Engaging soul and imagination with cognition and intellect, this resource connects one more fully to all the ways God speaks in and through his Scriptures. If you've been wanting to rediscover the presence of God—and the power of his written Word—I can think of no better resource.

MATT TEBBE, cofounder of Gravity Leadership

It's just plain rude not to respond when God speaks to us! Let *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible* help you never leave God's words without truly conversing with God about what you've read.

JAN JOHNSON, author of *When the Soul Listens* and coauthor of *Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice*

Modernizing ancient practices of biblical reflection significantly enhances our prayerful reading of the Scriptures. Dig in. Eat this book. Savor every morsel. So good for your soul. Our beloved mentor, Eugene Peterson, would have been delighted with our prayerful attentiveness and our transformed lives.

STEPHEN A. MACCHIA, founder and president of Leadership Transformations and director of the Pierce Center for Disciple Building at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Choose for yourself a metaphor for *lectio divina*: diving into God's Word, carefully marinating in it, or slowly chewing on it to be nourished. It is not reading for information, but for transformation. Eugene Peterson brings the Bible to us in American English vernacular—making it easier for us to digest. As young as late elementary school, I pictured myself in Bible stories and could also relate to the sentiments in the Psalms. I was with Zacchaeus up in the tree, craning my neck to see Jesus, wondering if Jesus would see me. I was with Jesus and overcome with grief as he wept over his friend Lazarus. I practiced *lectio divina* without knowing it. Peterson's *Message* paraphrase allows for rich, robust prayer and contemplation. Nuance. Eat this book. Be filled full with the life of God.

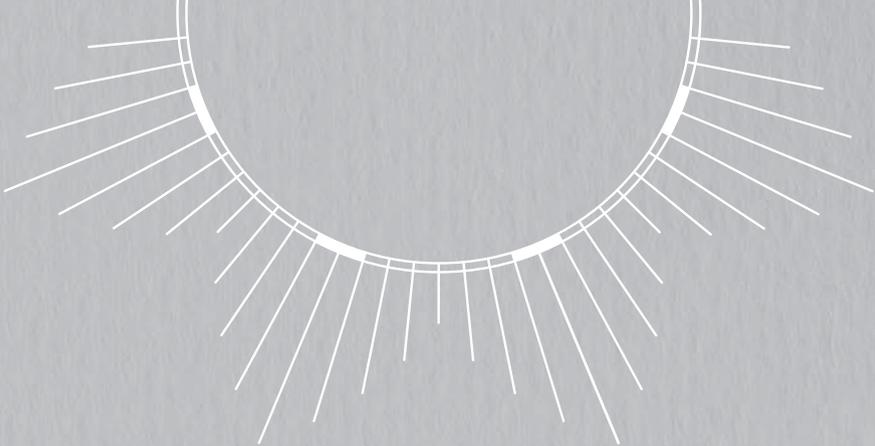
MARLENA GRAVES, author of *The Way Up Is Down*

The Message Prayerful Reading Bible combines two of my favorite ways of reading the Scriptures. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* opens windows to new understandings of familiar passages. *Lectio divina* invites me to enter into God's love and grace as I embrace these truths in daily life. I look forward to continuing to experience truth and grace through this book for years to come and to passing it along to my companions on the journey.

ALICE FRYLING, author of *Mirror for the Soul* and *Aging Faithfully*

I love *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible*! Its take-and-eat, chew-and-digest approach to God's Word will help you receive his message more deeply, moving it from your head to your heart. Enjoy the feast!

AMY BOUCHER PYE, author of *7 Ways to Pray*



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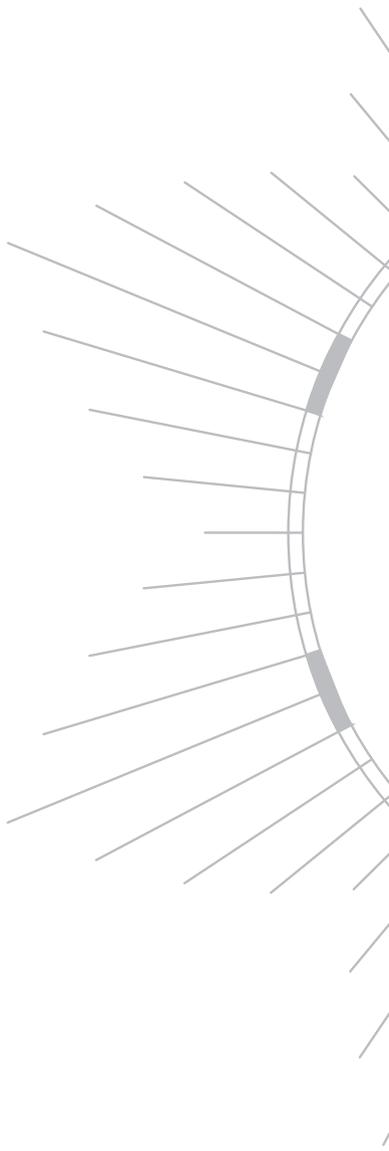
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*The Message is a contemporary rendering
of the Bible from the original languages,
crafted to present its tone, rhythm, events,
and ideas in everyday language.*





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INTRODUCTION TO THE MESSAGE

Reading is the first thing, just reading the Bible. As we read we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. We soon realize that we are included in the conversation. We didn't expect this. But this is precisely what generation after generation of Bible readers do find: The Bible is not only written about us but to us. In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.

We aren't used to this. We are used to reading books that explain things, or tell us what to do, or inspire or entertain us. But this is different. This is a world of revelation: God revealing to people just like us—men and women created in God's image—how God works and what is going on in this world in which we find ourselves. At the same time that God reveals all this, God draws us in by invitation and command to participate in God's working life. We gradually (or suddenly) realize that we are insiders in the most significant action of our time as God establishes his grand rule of love and justice on this earth (as it is in heaven). "Revelation" means that we are reading something we couldn't have guessed or figured out on our own. Revelation is what makes the Bible unique.

And so just reading this Bible, *The Message*, and listening to what we read, is the first thing. There will be time enough for study later on. But first, it is important simply to read, leisurely and thoughtfully. We need to get a feel for the way these stories and songs, these prayers and conversations, these sermons and visions, invite us into this large, large world in which the invisible God is behind and involved in everything visible and illuminates what it means to live here—really live, not just get across the street. As we read, and the longer we read, we begin to "get it"—we are in conversation with God. We find ourselves listening and answering in matters that most concern us: who we are, where we came from, where we are going, what makes us tick, the texture of the world and the communities we live in, and—most of all—the incredible love of God among us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Through reading the Bible, we see that there is far more to the world, more to us, more to what we see and more to what we don't see—more to everything!—than we had ever dreamed, and that this "more" has to do with God.

This is new for many of us, a different sort of book—a book that reads us even as we read it. We are used to picking up and reading books for what we can get out of them: information we can use, inspiration to energize us, instructions on how to do something or other, entertainment to while away a rainy day, wisdom that will guide us into living better. These things can and do take place when reading the Bible, but the Bible is given to us in the first place simply to invite us to make ourselves at home in the world of God, God’s word and world, and become familiar with the way God speaks and the ways in which we answer him with our lives.



Our reading turns up some surprises. The biggest surprise for many is how accessible this book is to those who simply open it up and read it. Virtually anyone can read this Bible with understanding. The reason that new translations are made every couple of generations or so is to keep the language of the Bible current with the common speech we use, the very language in which it was first written. We don’t have to be smart or well-educated to understand it, for it is written in the words and sentences we hear in the marketplace, on school playgrounds, and around the dinner table. Because the Bible is so famous and revered, many assume that we need experts to explain and interpret it for us—and, of course, there are some things that need to be explained. But the first men and women who listened to these words now written in our Bibles were ordinary, everyday, working-class people. One of the greatest of the early translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale, said that he was translating so that the “boy that driveth the plough” would be able to read the Scriptures.

One well-educated African man, who later became one of the most influential Bible teachers in our history (Augustine), was greatly offended when he first read the Bible. Instead of a book cultivated and polished in the literary style he admired so much, he found it full of homespun, earthy stories of plain, unimportant people. He read it in a Latin translation full of slang and jargon. He took one look at what he considered the “unspiritual” quality of so many of its characters and the everydayness of Jesus, and he contemptuously abandoned it. It was years before he realized that God had not taken the form of a sophisticated intellectual to teach us about highbrow heavenly culture so we could appreciate the finer things of God. When he saw that God entered our lives as a Jewish servant in order to save us from our sins, he started reading the book gratefully and believingly.

Some are also surprised that Bible reading does not introduce us to a “nicer” world. This biblical world is decidedly not an ideal world, the kind we see advertised in travel posters. Suffering and injustice and ugliness are not purged from the world in which God works and loves and saves. Nothing is glossed over. God works patiently and deeply, but often in hidden ways, in the mess of our humanity and history. Ours is not a neat and tidy world in which we are assured that we can get everything under our control. This takes considerable getting used to—there is mystery everywhere. The Bible does not give us a

predictable cause-effect world in which we can plan our careers and secure our futures. It is not a dream world in which everything works out according to our adolescent expectations—there is pain and poverty and abuse at which we cry out in indignation, “You can’t let this happen!” For most of us it takes years and years and years to exchange our dream world for this real world of grace and mercy, sacrifice and love, freedom and joy—the God-saved world.

Yet another surprise is that the Bible does not flatter us. It is not trying to sell us anything that promises to make life easier. It doesn’t offer secrets to what we often think of as prosperity or pleasure or high adventure. The reality that comes into focus as we read the Bible has to do with what God is doing in a saving love that includes us and everything we do. This is quite different from what our sin-stunted and culture-cluttered minds imagine. But our Bible reading does not give us access to a mail-order catalog of idols from which we can pick and choose to satisfy our fantasies. The Bible begins with God speaking creation and us into being. It continues with God entering into personalized and complex relationships with us, helping and blessing us, teaching and training us, correcting and disciplining us, loving and saving us. This is not an escape from reality but a plunge into more reality—a sacrificial but altogether better life all the way.

* * *

God doesn’t force any of this on us: God’s word is personal address, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing—but not forcing. Not coercing. We are given space and freedom to answer, to enter the conversation. For more than anything else the Bible invites our participation in the work and language of God.

As we read, we find that there is a connection between the Word Read and the Word Lived. Everything in this book is live-able. Many of us find that the most important question we ask as we read is not “What does it mean?” but “How can I live it?” So we read personally, not impersonally. We read in order to live our true selves, not just get information that we can use to raise our standard of living. Bible reading is a means of listening to and obeying God, not gathering religious data by which we can be our own gods.

You are going to hear stories in this book that will take you out of your preoccupation with yourself and into the spacious freedom in which God is working the world’s salvation. You are going to come across words and sentences that stab you awake to a beauty and hope that will connect you with your real life.

Be sure to answer.

Eugene H Peterson

LECTIO DIVINA: AN INTRODUCTION

“How do you read?”

LUKE 10:26

Reading the Bible, if we do not do it rightly, can get us into a lot of trouble. We pick up a Bible and find that we have God’s word in our hands—our hands. We can now handle it. It is easy enough to suppose that we are in control of it, that we can use it, that we are in charge of applying it wherever, whenever, and to whomever we wish without regard to appropriateness or conditions.

Those who don’t know the conditions implicit in the technology of the Bible are dangerous to themselves and others. And so, as we hand out Bibles and urge people to read them, it is imperative that we also say, *caveat lector*, let the reader beware.

The word of God is not my possession. The words printed on the pages of my Bible give witness to the living and active revelation of the God of creation and salvation, the God of love who became the Word made flesh in Jesus, and I had better not forget it. If in my Bible reading I lose touch with this livingness, if I fail to listen to this living Jesus, submit to this sovereignty, and respond to this love, I become arrogant in my knowing and impersonal in my behavior. An enormous amount of damage is done in the name of Christian living by bad Bible reading. *Caveat lector*, let the reader beware.

Lectio divina trains us in the discipline of reading Scripture rightly. At every turn of the page it poses Jesus’ question to us: “How do you read?”

Lectio divina is the deliberate and intentional practice of making the transition from a kind of reading that treats and handles, however reverently, Jesus dead to listening to, accompanying, and following Jesus alive. A word written is less than a word spoken—and sometimes not even the same thing at all. Which, of course, is why many of us prefer words written to words spoken. It is simpler, we are more in control, we don’t have to deal with the complexities of people. If we don’t like what we are reading we can shut the book and pick up another—or go shopping, or take a walk, or spend an hour or so in the garden.

But we do not read the Bible in order to reduce our lives to what is convenient

to us or manageable by us—we want to get in on the great invisibles of the Trinity, the soaring adorations of the angels, the quirky cragginess of the prophets, and . . . Jesus.

Lectio divina is a way of life that develops “according to the Scriptures.” It is not just a skill that we exercise when we have a Bible open before us but a life congruent with the Word made flesh to which the Scriptures give witness. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that the word of God originated when “going through a long line of prophets, God [spoke to] our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. . . . It’s crucial that we keep a firm grip on what we’ve heard” (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2:1). These are spoken words delivered to us by “pioneers who blazed the way” (Hebrews 12:1) and now rewritten in our Holy Scriptures. It is the task of *lectio divina* to get those words heard and listened to, words written in ink now rewritten in blood.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Eugene H. Peterson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent initial 'E'.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit . . . we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:16-18, *THE MESSAGE*

“The Bible is not only written about us but to us,” Eugene Peterson writes in the introduction to The Message. “In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.”

This is not a new idea from Eugene, but rather his expression of the ancient Christian understanding of how we encounter God through Scripture. The spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* (“holy/sacred/divine reading”) has been a principal means for generations of Christians to experience this divine encounter through the pages of the Bible:

- pausing for a moment and preparing to encounter God (*silencio*, or “stop”)
- doing a first reading and then making observations about the text (*lectio*, or “read”)
- reflecting on what we observed in our reading of the text and in ourselves as we read (*meditatio*, or “ponder”)
- engaging in conversation with God inspired by the text (*oratio*, or “pray”)
- taking note of what this time with God has brought to the surface (*contemplatio*, or “reflect”), and finally,
- considering how this time with God translates into our lives with God (*incarnatio*, or “live”)

The Message Prayerful Reading Bible: Jeremiah & Lamentations has been carefully curated to facilitate this holy reading experience for you. Through the uniquely readable language of *The Message* version of the Bible itself, the guided reflections designed to orient you to the practice, the structured journaling pages at the outset of each book of the Bible, and, finally, the wide-open spaces of the remaining journaling pages, our hope is for you to move quickly from *lectio divina* as a habit you are learning to *lectio divina* as a natural, automatic way of engaging with the Scriptures—in fact, in Eugene’s words, as “a way of life.”

Here, then, is a brief overview of the intent of each feature of the book.

- **Lectio Divina: An Introduction.** If you’re like many of us, you may have skipped or skimmed Eugene’s overview of the idea of *lectio divina*. We hope you’ll flip back to it and take the time to read it. You are entering a way of life, and a little orientation goes a long way toward getting you settled.
- **Guided reflections.** Intermittently throughout this book, you’ll find guided reflections for your use. We’ve preselected passages of Scripture for you to interact with and provided touch points for each stage in the *lectio divina* process. These will be satisfying devotional experiences for you, but they will also help you get your feet wet in the *lectio divina* experience. Think of the instructions and questions in these guided reflections as stepping-off points: Feel free to adapt them as you are led. The point is for you to feel increasingly comfortable moving through this process in conversation with God.

A quick caveat: Please don’t skip any steps! *Lectio divina* is a holistic experience, and to bypass any part of the process is to rob yourself of a meaningful encounter with God. You’ll notice that each guided reflection begins (*Stop*) and ends (*Live*) simply with a brief passage of Scripture; even these are an essential aspect of the experience. Let yourself be led through each step of the process each time you come to the Scriptures.

- **Structured pages.** Near the beginning of Jeremiah and then of Lamentations, you’ll find a page with minimal instructions for a prayerful reading experience. In these cases, you’re invited to select your own passage of Scripture and move through the *lectio divina* process at your own pace, with minimal direction. Our hope is that these pages will further assimilate you to the process of prayerful reading and give you greater confidence in the possibility embedded in each meeting you have with God and his Word. Again, don’t skip a step in the process, but give yourself freedom to engage with each step in a way that makes sense to you and God in the moment.
- **Journaling pages.** The rest of the book is simply this: you, the Scriptures, and space for you to meet with God. Turn through the pages

and you'll often find Bible text on one side and open journaling space on the other. We've included as a reminder the stages of *lectio divina*—*Stop, Read, Ponder, Pray, Reflect, Live*—but we want you to feel at liberty to use this open space in whatever way will draw you deeper into life with God by way of the Scriptures. Draw, doodle, take notes, journal, or move through the prayerful reading process—whatever seems sensible to you and the Spirit.

The Bible is a gift to us from the God who loves us and desires for us to draw near to him—not just in chance encounters but in the normal outworking of our everyday lives. *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible: Jeremiah & Lamentations* is meant to help you do just that, and in the process to find yourself settled deeply and contentedly in the palm of God's hand.

JEREMIAH



Demolish, and Then Start Over

1 ¹⁻⁴ The Message of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah of the family of priests who lived in Anathoth in the country of Benjamin. God's Message began to come to him during the thirteenth year that Josiah son of Amon reigned over Judah. It continued to come to him during the time Jehoiakim son of Josiah reigned over Judah. And it continued to come to him clear down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of the reign of Zedekiah son of Josiah over Judah, the year that Jerusalem was taken into exile. This is what GOD said:

5 "Before I shaped you in the womb,
I knew all about you.
Before you saw the light of day,
I had holy plans for you:
A prophet to the nations—
that's what I had in mind for you."

6 But I said, "Hold it, Master GOD! Look
at me.
I don't know anything. I'm only a boy!"

7-8 GOD told me, "Don't say, 'I'm only a boy.'
I'll tell you where to go and you'll go
there.
I'll tell you what to say and you'll say it.
Don't be afraid of a soul.
I'll be right there, looking after you."
GOD's Decree.

9-10 GOD reached out, touched my mouth,
and said,
"Look! I've just put my words in your
mouth—hand-delivered!
See what I've done? I've given you a job to do
among nations and governments—a red-
letter day!
Your job is to pull up and tear down,
take apart and demolish,
And then start over,
building and planting."

Stand Up and Say Your Piece

11-12 GOD's Message came to me: "What do
you see, Jeremiah?"
I said, "A walking stick—that's all."
And GOD said, "Good eyes! I'm sticking with
you.
I'll make every word I give you come true."

13-15 GOD's Message came again: "So what
do you see now?"

I said, "I see a boiling pot, tipped down
toward us."
Then GOD told me, "Disaster will pour out
of the north
on everyone living in this land.
Watch for this: I'm calling all the kings out
of the north."
GOD's Decree.

15-16 "They'll come and set up headquarters
facing Jerusalem's gates,
Facing all the city walls,
facing all the villages of Judah.
I'll pronounce my judgment on the people
of Judah
for walking out on me—what a terrible
thing to do!—
And courting other gods with their
offerings,
worshiping as gods sticks they'd carved,
stones they'd painted.

17 "But you—up on your feet and get dressed
for work!
Stand up and say your piece. Say exactly
what I tell you to say.
Don't pull your punches
or I'll pull you out of the lineup.

18-19 "Stand at attention while I prepare you
for your work.
I'm making you as impregnable as a
castle,
Immovable as a steel post,
solid as a concrete block wall.
You're a one-man defense system
against this culture,
Against Judah's kings and princes,
against the priests and local leaders.
They'll fight you, but they won't
even scratch you.
I'll back you up every inch of the way."
GOD's Decree.

Israel Was God's Holy Choice

2 ¹⁻³ GOD's Message came to me. It went
like this:

"Get out in the streets and call to Jerusalem,
'GOD's Message!

I remember your youthful loyalty,
our love as newlyweds.
You stayed with me through the wilderness
years,
stuck with me through all the hard places.
Israel was GOD's holy choice,
the pick of the crop.
Anyone who laid a hand on her
would soon wish he hadn't!"
GOD's Decree.

+ + +

4-6 Hear GOD's Message, House of Jacob!
Yes, you—House of Israel!
GOD's Message: "What did your ancestors
find fault with in me
that they drifted so far from me,
Took up with Sir Windbag
and turned into windbags themselves?
It never occurred to them to say, 'Where's
GOD,
the God who got us out of Egypt,
Who took care of us through thick and thin,
those rough-and-tumble
wilderness years of parched deserts and
death valleys,
A land that no one who enters comes out of,
a cruel, inhospitable land?'

7-8 "I brought you to a garden land
where you could eat lush fruit.
But you barged in and polluted my land,
trashed and defiled my dear land.
The priests never thought to ask, 'Where's
GOD?'
The religion experts knew nothing of me.
The rulers defied me.
The prophets preached god Baal
And chased empty god-dreams and silly
god-schemes.

9-11 "Because of all this, I'm bringing
charges against you"
—GOD's Decree—
"charging you and your children and
your grandchildren.
Look around. Have you ever seen anything
quite like this?
Sail to the western islands and look.
Travel to the Kedar wilderness and look.
Look closely. Has this ever happened
before,
That a nation has traded in its gods
for gods that aren't even close to gods?
But my people have traded my Glory
for empty god-dreams and silly
god-schemes.

12-13 "Stand in shock, heavens, at what you
see!
Throw up your hands in disbelief—this
can't be!"
GOD's Decree.
"My people have committed a compound
sin:
they've walked out on me, the fountain
Of fresh flowing waters, and then dug
cisterns—
cisterns that leak, cisterns that are no
better than sieves.

14-17 "Isn't Israel a valued servant,
born into a family with place and
position?
So how did she end up a piece of meat
fought over by snarling and roaring
lions?
There's nothing left of her but a few old
bones,
her towns trashed and deserted.
Egyptians from the cities of Memphis and
Tahpanhes
have broken your skulls.
And why do you think all this has
happened?
Isn't it because you walked out on your
God
just as he was beginning to lead you in
the right way?

18-19 "And now, what do you think you'll
get by going off to Egypt?
Maybe a cool drink of Nile River
water?
Or what do you think you'll get by going
off to Assyria?
Maybe a long drink of Euphrates River
water?
Your evil ways will get you a sound
thrashing, that's what you'll get.
You'll pay dearly for your disloyal
ways.
Take a long, hard look at what you've
done and its bitter results.
Was it worth it to have walked out
on your God?"
GOD's Decree, Master
God-of-the-Angel-Armies.

Addicted to Alien Gods

20-22 "A long time ago you broke out of the
harness.
You shook off all restraints.
You said, 'I will not serve!'
and off you went,

Visiting every sex-and-religion shrine on
the way,
like a common whore.
You were a select vine when I planted you
from completely reliable stock.
And look how you've turned out—
a tangle of rancid growth, a poor excuse
for a vine.
Scrub, using the strongest soaps.
Scour your skin raw.
The sin-grease won't come out. I can't stand
to even look at you!"
God's Decree, the Master's Decree.

23-24 "How dare you tell me, 'I'm not stained
by sin.
I've never chased after the Baal sex gods'!
Well, look at the tracks you've left behind in
the valley.
How do you account for what is written
in the desert dust—
Tracks of a camel in heat, running this way
and that,
tracks of a wild donkey in rut,
Sniffing the wind for the slightest scent of
sex.
Who could possibly corral her!
On the hunt for sex, sex, and more sex—
insatiable, indiscriminate, promiscuous.

25 "Slow down. Take a deep breath. What's
the hurry?
Why wear yourself out? Just what are you
after anyway?
But you say, 'I can't help it.
I'm addicted to alien gods. I can't quit.'

+ + +

26-28 "Just as a thief is chagrined, but only
when caught,
so the people of Israel are chagrined,
Caught along with their kings and princes,
their priests and prophets.
They walk up to a tree and say, 'My father!'
They pick up a stone and say, 'My
mother! You bore me!'
All I ever see of them is their backsides.
They never look me in the face.
But when things go badly, they don't
hesitate to come running,
calling out, 'Get a move on! Save us!'
Why not go to your handcrafted gods you're
so fond of?
Rouse them. Let them save you from your
bad times.
You've got more gods, Judah,
than you know what to do with.

Trying Out Another Sin-Project

29-30 "What do you have against me,
running off to assert your
'independence?'"
God's Decree.
"I've wasted my time trying to train your
children.
They've paid no attention to me, ignored
my discipline.
And you've gotten rid of your
God-messengers,
treating them like dirt and sweeping
them away.

31-32 "What a generation you turned out
to be!
Didn't I tell you? Didn't I warn you?
Have I let you down, Israel?
Am I nothing but a dead-end street?
Why do my people say, 'Good riddance!
From now on we're on our own?'
Young women don't forget their jewelry,
do they?
Brides don't show up without their veils,
do they?
But my people forget me.
Day after day after day they never give me
a thought.

+ + +

33-35 "What an impressive start you made
to get the most out of life.
You founded schools of sin,
taught graduate courses in evil!
And now you're sending out graduates,
resplendent in cap and gown—
except the gowns are stained with the
blood of your victims!
All that blood convicts you.
You cut and hurt a lot of people to get
where you are.
And yet you have the nerve to say, 'I've done
nothing wrong.
God doesn't mind. He hasn't punished
me, has he?'
Don't look now, but judgment's on the way,
aimed at you who say, 'I've done nothing
wrong.'

36-37 "You think it's just a small thing, don't
you,
to try out another sin-project when the
first one fails?
But Egypt will leave you in the lurch
the same way that Assyria did.
You're going to walk away from there
wringing your hands.

I, GOD, have blacklisted those you trusted.
You'll get not a lick of help from them."

Your Sex-and-Religion Obsessions

3 1 GOD's Message came to me as follows:

"If a man's wife
walks out on him
And marries another man,
can he take her back as if nothing had
happened?
Wouldn't that raise a huge stink
in the land?
And isn't that what you've done—
'whored' your way with god after god?
And now you want to come back as if
nothing had happened."
GOD's Decree.

2-5 "Look around at the hills.
Where have you *not* had sex?
You've camped out like hunters stalking
deer.
You've solicited many lover-gods,
Like a streetwalking whore
chasing after other gods.
And so the rain has stopped.
No more rain from the skies!
But it doesn't even faze you. Brazen as
whores,
you carry on as if you've done nothing
wrong.
Then you have the nerve to call out, 'My
father!
You took care of me when I was a child.
Why not now?
Are you going to keep up your anger
nonstop?'
That's your line. Meanwhile you keep
sinning nonstop."

Admit Your God-Defiance

6-10 GOD spoke to me during the reign of King
Josiah: "You have noticed, haven't you, how
fickle Israel has visited every hill and grove
of trees as a whore at large? I assumed that
after she had gotten it out of her system,
she'd come back, but she didn't. Her flighty
sister, Judah, saw what she did. She also saw
that because of fickle Israel's loose morals I
threw her out, gave her her walking papers.
But that didn't faze flighty sister Judah. She
went out, big as you please, and took up a
whore's life also. She took up cheap sex-and-
religion as a sideline diversion, an indulgent
recreation, and used anything and anyone,
flouting sanity and sanctity alike, stinking

up the country. And not once in all this did
flighty sister Judah even give me a nod, al-
though she made a show of it from time to
time." GOD's Decree.

11-12 Then GOD told me, "Fickle Israel was
a good sight better than flighty Judah. Go
and preach this message. Face north toward
Israel and say:

12-15 "'Turn back, fickle Israel.
I'm not just hanging back to punish you.
I'm committed in love to you.
My anger doesn't see the nonstop.
Just admit your guilt.
Admit your God-defiance.
Admit to your promiscuous life with casual
partners,
pulling strangers into the sex-and-
religion groves
While turning a deaf ear to me.'"
GOD's Decree.
"Come back, wandering children!"
GOD's Decree.
"I, yes I, am your true husband.
I'll pick you out one by one—
This one from the city, these two from the
country—
and bring you to Zion.
I'll give you good shepherd-rulers who rule
my way,
who rule you with intelligence and
wisdom.

16 "And this is what will happen: You will
increase and prosper in the land. The time
will come"—GOD's Decree!—"when no one
will say any longer, 'Oh, for the good old
days! Remember the Ark of the Covenant?'
It won't even occur to anyone to say it—"the
good old days.' The so-called good old days
of the Ark are gone for good.

17 "Jerusalem will be the new Ark—"GOD's
Throne.' All the godless nations, no longer
stuck in the ruts of their evil ways, will gather
there to honor GOD.

18 "At that time, the House of Judah will
join up with the House of Israel. Holding
hands, they'll leave the north country and
come to the land I willed to your ancestors.

+ + +

19-20 "I planned what I'd say if you returned
to me:
'Good! I'll bring you back into the family.
I'll give you choice land,
land that the godless nations would die
for.'

And I imagined that you would say, 'Dear father!'

and would never again go off and leave me.

But no luck. Like a false-hearted woman walking out on her husband, you, the whole family of Israel, have proven false to me."

GOD's Decree.

21-22 The sound of voices comes drifting out of the hills,

the unhappy sound of Israel's crying, Israel lamenting the wasted years, never once giving her God a thought.

"Come back, wandering children! I can heal your wanderlust!"

+ + +

22-25 "We're here! We've come back to you. You're our own true GOD!

All that popular religion was a cheap lie, duped crowds buying up the latest in gods.

We're back! Back to our true GOD, the salvation of Israel.

The Fraud picked us clean, swindled us of what our ancestors bequeathed us, Gyped us out of our inheritance—

God-blessed flocks and God-given children.

We made our bed and now lie in it, all tangled up in the dirty sheets of dishonor.

All because we sinned against our GOD, we and our fathers and mothers.

From the time we took our first steps, said our first words, we've been rebels, disobeying the voice of our GOD."

+ + +

4¹⁻² "If you want to come back, O Israel, you must really come back to me.

You must get rid of your stinking sin paraphernalia

and not wander away from me anymore.

Then you can say words like, 'As GOD lives . . .'

and have them mean something true and just and right.

And the godless nations will get caught up in the blessing and find something in Israel to write home about."

+ + +

3-4 Here's another Message from God to the people of Judah and Jerusalem:

"Plow your unplowed fields, but then don't plant weeds in the soil!

Yes, circumcise your *lives* for God's sake.

Plow your unplowed hearts,

all you people of Judah and Jerusalem.

Prevent fire—the fire of my anger—

for once it starts it can't be put out.

Your wicked ways

are fuel for the fire.

God's Sledgehammer Anger

5-8 "Sound the alarm in Judah, broadcast the news in Jerusalem.

Say, 'Blow the ram's horn trumpet through the land!'

Shout out—a bullhorn bellow!—

'Close ranks!

Run for your lives to the shelters!'

Send up a flare warning Zion:

'Not a minute to lose! Don't sit on your hands!'

Disaster's descending from the north. I set it off!

When it lands, it will shake the foundations.

Invaders have pounced like a lion from its cover,

ready to rip nations to shreds,

Leaving your land in wrack and ruin, your cities in rubble, abandoned.

Dress in funereal black.

Weep and wail,

For GOD's sledgehammer anger

has slammed into us head-on.

9 "When this happens"

—GOD's Decree—

"King and princes will lose heart;

priests will be baffled and prophets stand dumbfounded."

10 Then I said, "Alas, Master GOD!

You've fed lies to this people, this Jerusalem.

You assured them, 'All is well, don't worry,'

at the very moment when the sword was at their throats."

+ + +

11-12 At that time, this people, yes, this very Jerusalem,

will be told in plain words:

"The northern hordes are sweeping in from the desert steppes—

A wind that's up to no good, a gale-force
wind.
I ordered this wind.
I'm pronouncing
my hurricane judgment on my people."

Your Evil Life Is Piercing Your Heart

13-14 Look at them! Like banks of storm
clouds,
racing, tumbling, their chariots a
tornado,
Their horses faster than eagles!
Woe to us! We're done for!
Jerusalem! Scrub the evil from your lives
so you'll be fit for salvation.
How much longer will you harbor
devious and malignant designs within
you?

15-17 What's this? A messenger from Dan?
Bad news from Ephraim's hills!

Make the report public.
Broadcast the news to Jerusalem:
"Invaders from far off are
raising war cries against Judah's towns.
They're all over her, like a dog on a bone.
And why? Because she rebelled
against me."
God's Decree.

18 "It's the way you've lived
that's brought all this on you.
The bitter taste is from your evil life.
That's what's piercing your heart."

* * *

19-21 I'm doubled up with cramps in my
belly—
a poker burns in my gut.
My insides are tearing me up,
never a moment's peace.
The ram's horn trumpet blast rings in my
ears,
the signal for all-out war.
Disaster hard on the heels of disaster,
the whole country in ruins!
In one stroke my home is destroyed,
the walls flattened in the blink of an eye.
How long do I have to look at the warning
flares,
listen to the siren of danger?

Experts at Evil

22 "What fools my people are!
They have no idea who I am.
A company of half-wits,
dopes and donkeys all!

Experts at evil
but klutzes at good."

23-26 I looked at the earth—
it was back to pre-Genesis chaos and
emptiness.

I looked at the skies,
and not a star to be seen.
I looked at the mountains—
they were trembling like aspen leaves,
And all the hills
rocking back and forth in the wind.
I looked—what's this! Not a man or woman
in sight,
and not a bird to be seen in the skies.
I looked—this can't be! Every garden and
orchard shriveled up.
All the towns were ghost towns.
And all this because of GOD,
because of the blazing anger of GOD.

27-28 Yes, this is GOD's Word on the matter:

"The whole country will be laid waste—
still it won't be the end of the world.
The earth will mourn
and the skies lament
Because I've given my word and won't take
it back.
I've decided and won't change my mind."

You're Not Going to Seduce Anyone

29 Someone shouts, "Horsemen and archers!"
and everybody runs for cover.
They hide in ditches,
they climb into caves.
The cities are emptied,
not a person left anywhere.

30-31 And you, what do you think you're
up to?

Dressing up in party clothes,
Decking yourselves out in jewelry,
putting on lipstick and rouge and
mascara!

Your primping goes for nothing.
You're not going to seduce anyone.
They're out to *kill* you!

And what's that I hear? The cry of a woman
in labor,
the screams of a mother giving birth to
her firstborn.

It's the cry of Daughter Zion, gasping for
breath,
reaching out for help:
"Help, oh help me! I'm dying!
The killers are on me!"

AN EYE FOR TRUTH (Jeremiah 5:3-6)

+ + +

STOP *“I, God, search the heart and examine the mind. I get to the heart of the human.”*
(Jeremiah 17:10)

READ Read Jeremiah 5:3-6 out loud as if you’re having a conversation with God. Read it slowly and calmly. Then read it a second time, this time silently but urgently, as though the conversation were taking place in the midst of an emergency.

PONDER How do you react to the “hard” language of the first portion of this passage? What do you notice about the image of God this description evokes for you?

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Which people do you identify with the most in this passage? The “poor people” who “were never taught anything about God”? Or the “people from the best families” who “know what’s going on, the way God works”? Or do you identify most with Jeremiah, the narrator? Why?

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How do you react to the language of the last portion of this passage, about the “rebels” and “invaders” and “streets [that] aren’t safe”? Are there emotions or sensations that come up for you when you read it? Or is this passage sitting pretty flat for you? Why do you think that is?

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PRAY Talk to God from the perspective you most identified with in this passage. Ask him to help you understand the ways your instincts might get in the way of trusting and following him. Then try talking to him from the perspective of the person you most struggled to identify with in this passage. Ask him to give you deeper understanding and grace for those who respond to him in ways different from your natural response, and a deeper understanding of his own ways.

REFLECT What does it mean to have “an eye for truth”? To what extent do you have an eye for truth? What sorts of things tend to obscure it? What helps you recover it?

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LIVE *“Whatever he tells you, do it.”* (John 2:5)

Sins Are Piled Sky-High

5 ¹⁻² “Patrol Jerusalem’s streets.
Look around. Take note.
Search the market squares.

See if you can find one man, one woman,
A single soul who does what is right
and tries to live a true life.

I want to forgive that person.”

GOD’s Decree.

“But if all they do is say, ‘As sure as GOD
lives . . .’
they’re nothing but a bunch of liars.”

3-6 But you, GOD,
you have an eye for truth, don’t you?
You hit them hard, but it didn’t faze them.
You disciplined them, but they refused
correction.

Hardheaded, harder than rock,
they wouldn’t change.

Then I said to myself, “Well, these are just
poor people.

They don’t know any better.

They were never taught anything about
GOD.

They never went to prayer meetings.
I’ll find some people from the best families.
I’ll talk to them.

They’ll know what’s going on, the way GOD
works.

They’ll know the score.”

But they were no better! Rebels all!

Off doing their own thing.

The invaders are ready to pounce and kill,
like a mountain lion, a wilderness wolf,
Panthers on the prowl.

The streets aren’t safe anymore.

And why? Because the people’s sins are
piled sky-high;
their betrayals are past counting.

7-9 “Why should I even bother with you any
longer?

Your children wander off, leaving me,

Taking up with gods
that aren’t even gods.

I satisfied their deepest needs, and then
they went off with the ‘sacred’ whores,
left me for orgies in sex shrines!

A bunch of well-groomed, lusty stallions,
each one pawing and snorting for his
neighbor’s wife.

Do you think I’m going to stand around and
do nothing?”

GOD’s Decree.

“Don’t you think I’ll take serious measures
against a people like this?

Eyes That Don’t Really Look, Ears That Don’t Really Listen

10-11 “Go down the rows of vineyards and rip
out the vines,

but not all of them. Leave a few.

Prune back those vines!

That growth didn’t come from GOD!

They’ve betrayed me over and over again,
Judah and Israel both.”

GOD’s Decree.

12-13 “They’ve spread lies about GOD.

They’ve said, ‘There’s nothing to him.

Nothing bad will happen to us,
neither famine nor war will come our way.

The prophets are all windbags.

They speak nothing but nonsense.”

14 Therefore, this is what GOD said to me,
GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies:

“Because they have talked this way,
they are going to eat those words.

Watch now! I’m putting my words
as fire in your mouth.

And the people are a pile of kindling
ready to go up in flames.

15-17 “Attention! I’m bringing a far-off nation
against you, O house of Israel.”

GOD’s Decree.

“A solid nation,
an ancient nation,

A nation that speaks another language.

You won’t understand a word they say.

When they aim their arrows, you’re as good
as dead.

They’re a nation of real fighters!

They’ll clean you out of house and home,
rob you of crops and children alike.

They’ll feast on your sheep and cattle,
strip your vines and fig trees.

And the fortresses that made you feel so
safe—

leveled with a stroke of the sword!

18-19 “Even then, as bad as it will be”—
GOD’s Decree!—“it will not be the end of the
world for you. And when people ask, ‘Why
did our GOD do all this to us?’ you must say to
them, ‘This is back on you. Just as you left me
and served foreign gods in your own coun-
try, so now you must serve foreigners in their
own country.’”

20-25 “Tell the house of Jacob this,
put out this bulletin in Judah: