
Interpretation Bible Studies Leader's Helps—Jeremiah

By Robert R. Laha Jr.

Study Guide by Martha Bettis-Gee

The IBS Leader's Helps are designed to facilitate group study by providing lesson plans for the ten units in each of the Interpretation Bible Studies. These lesson plans utilize a variety of interactive methods, which have been chosen for the express purpose of engaging participants in the learning process.

Each participant in the group should have a copy of the IBS study book and should make a commitment to do advance preparation for each session. The sessions are planned for one hour. If the time allotted is shorter than an hour, it will be necessary to be selective about the activities, choosing those that are most appropriate for your group.

Leader Preparation

- *Read Jeremiah in its entirety before beginning to teach.* It is important to familiarize yourself with the book's overall content, so you can see how the individual passages fit into the larger scope of the book.
- *Skim through the whole study guide to discern its flow.* This is especially helpful if there are multiple leaders, in order to prevent leaping ahead into the next unit.
- *Prepare the room ahead of time.* For informal discussion and ease of sharing, a semicircular arrangement of chairs works best. Position yourself as one of the group, instead of setting yourself apart as "the authority."
- *Secure necessary teaching aids.* A newsprint easel is an invaluable asset. Be sure to have markers and masking tape if you wish to

display the sheets for future reference. Check the teaching suggestions for other necessary materials, such as hymnals, paper, pencils, art supplies, and so on. A map of the empires in Jeremiah's time would be a useful resource.

- *Prepare necessary handouts.* A folder for each participant's handouts is helpful but not essential.
- *Keep the key idea firmly in mind.* Make sure all activities point participants toward this goal.
- *Pray for God's guidance.* Prior to making preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.

Jeremiah's World (Jeremiah 36–39)

Key Idea: In the face of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Jeremiah's words to the people remind us of our failure to keep covenant with God.

Advance Preparation

- You will need hymnals for each participant. Check to see if any of the suggested hymns are in the hymnal available to you.
- On newsprint, print the following, and post it where it can be easily read:

The reader who is not confused by reading the book of Jeremiah has not understood it.

R. P. Carroll, Jeremiah, 9¹

- If possible, post a map of Judah at the time of the exile. Also make a poster of the sidebar “Jeremiah's Life and Times,” found on page 74. It will be helpful to display this poster throughout the study.
- If possible, read the entire introduction of the Interpretation commentary on Jeremiah, by R. E. Clements.
- The information on pages 5–8 of the study book will be helpful in setting the context in activity 5. Or check one of the other sources listed under “Want to Know More?” on page 12 of the study book.
- For activity 6, print the following headings from the New Revised Standard Version of Jeremiah 36–39 on newsprint or a board:

The Scroll Read in the Temple (36:1–10)

The Scroll Read in the Palace (36:11–19)

Jehoiakim Burns the Scroll (36:20–26)

Jeremiah Dictates Another (36:27–32)

Zedekiah's Vain Hope (37:1–10)

1. R. P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 9.

Jeremiah Is Imprisoned (37:11–21)

Jeremiah in the Dungeon (38:1–6)

Jeremiah Is Rescued by Ebed-melech (38:7–13)

Zedekiah Consults Jeremiah Again (38:14–28)

The Fall of Jerusalem (39:1–10)

Jeremiah Set Free, Remembers Ebed-melech (39:11–18)

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Open with a Prayer

Use this prayer, or one of your own:

*God of the ages, like Jeremiah, we live in turbulent times. Grant us the clear vision to discern what we are called to do and be. Give us hope in the face of uncertainty and the peace that comes from our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to encounter you through the message of your Word.
Amen.*

2. Sing a Hymn

Sing “Live Into Hope” or another hymn about hope, “By the Waters of Babylon,” or “By the Babylonian Rivers” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #332, #245, #246).

3. Get Acquainted

Ask participants to introduce themselves and to take turns responding to this open-ended sentence:

My hope for this study is . . .

jot down their responses on a sheet of newsprint. Save the newsprint until the conclusion of the study.

Presentation (25 minutes)

4. Introduce the Study

Call the participants' attention to the newsprint sheet on which you printed the observation from the IBS commentary on Jeremiah. In

your own words, summarize a few of the ideas in the introduction about some of the difficulties and contradictions in Jeremiah.

Read, or ask a volunteer to read, the quotation from *Italo Calvino* (p. 3). Encourage participants to try to read the entire book of Jeremiah during the course of the study.

5. Set the Stage

Using the information you gathered from the suggested sources, briefly set the stage for participants about what was happening in Jeremiah's world. If you have a map of the empires in Jeremiah's time, point out Judah's location with respect to Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. Also refer to the poster you made of the sidebar "Jeremiah's Life and Times."

6. Small-Group Reading

Divide the group into eleven pairs, if your group is that large. Call their attention to the headings from Jeremiah you listed on newsprint. If your group is smaller than twenty, assign the portions of Scripture to individuals. Allow a few minutes for participants to read over their assigned Scripture; then ask each pair or individual to briefly summarize the assigned passage.

Teaching Tip: Many names in Old Testament Scriptures are difficult to pronounce, and even adults can be intimidated by the effort to do so. In these chapters, some characters are also identified by their family connections (for example, Baruch son of Neriah). Go over the pronunciations of the names of key characters such as Jeremiah and Baruch, and encourage participants to avoid getting bogged down in the pronunciations of lesser characters in the story.

Exploration (20 minutes)

7. Explore Sin, Judgment, and Redemption

Call participants' attention to the final paragraph on page 12, pointing out that within these four chapters not only is a historical overview of the book provided, but also the themes of Judah's sin and rebellion and Yahweh's announcement of judgment are revealed.

- Divide into small groups of four or five, and invite participants to discuss questions 1 and 4 on page 12.

8. Explore Responsibility

Invite someone to read aloud Matthew 27:24–26 and John 19:6. Discuss question 2 on page 12. Encourage participants to identify specific issues in their homes, communities, churches, and workplaces where we abdicate responsibility. Ask:

- Why do you think we wash our hands of our responsibilities in these instances?

9. Discuss Prophets and Kings

Point out for participants that Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar and theologian, claims that the crisis of Judah's downfall is “the dominant and shaping event of the entire Old Testament” (in *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*, quoted on page 5 of the study guide). Invite the group to reflect on what might be the dominant and shaping events for our society today. Then invite the group to discuss question 3 on page 12. Ask:

- What is the church's prophetic role in speaking truth to power about these events?

Response (5 minutes)

10. Make Scrolls

Tell participants that in his commentary on Jeremiah, Clements points out that the transition from the long period in which prophecy existed only in the oral tradition to the beginning of the written tradition has significant and long-reaching implications. Grounded in a specific historical context, the original meaning of a prophecy expands to reveal the very nature and mind of God and reveals God's word to us today in our own setting.

Give each participant a sheet of paper, a pen or pencil, and a length of ribbon. Invite them to reflect for a few minutes on the themes of sin, judgment, repentance, and hope and to record a ques-

tion, comment, or reflection on what situations and events need a prophetic word today. Ask them to print their name on the back of the paper, roll it up, and tie it to make a scroll. Collect the scrolls in a box or basket, and set it aside until the end of the study.

Closing (5 minutes)

11. Join in Prayer

Close with the following prayer, or one of your own choosing:

God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, we offer up to you the despair of the exile and the despair of our own time. As we explore your Word first addressed through Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon, transform that Word of hope for us. Give us fresh new insights, and point us to new directions as disciples living in an uncertain world. Amen.

12. Give an Assignment

If they have not already done so, ask participants to read the entire book of Jeremiah over the next few weeks. Also ask them to read unit 2 in the study book and Jeremiah 1:1–19, as well as the passages from Exodus and Judges listed at the top of page 17. Encourage them to read 2 Kings 23–25 to get a picture of the historical context of Jeremiah.

2

The Call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:1–19)

Key Idea: In Jeremiah’s call we get a glimpse of the God who not only plucks up and pulls down but also ultimately builds and plants.

Advance Preparation

- Head a sheet of newsprint with the words “Curriculum Vitae: Jeremiah.” Under this title, print the following:

Name:

Occupation:

Career Timeframe:

Family Background:

Qualifications:

- Before class, recruit six volunteers to read the Scripture verses for the opening prayer.
- Continue to display the poster you prepared, “Jeremiah’s Life and Times.”

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Pray and Read Scripture

Ask the volunteers to read aloud the following verses: Genesis 15:1; Exodus 3:1, Samuel 3:15; Isaiah 41:10; Luke 1:30; 1 Corinthians 2:3.

Pray the following:

God of the ages, open our ears to discern our call to ministry. Remind us that when we are anxious or afraid or reluctant to risk our own security or position, you are always with us. Amen.

Presentation (10 minutes)

2. Fill Out a Curriculum Vitae

Invite participants to help you fill out a brief bio for Jeremiah using Jeremiah 1:1–19 and the information on page 13 in the study book. After filling in all the other appropriate information, focus on Jeremiah's qualifications. Ask:

- In what ways do you think Jeremiah was qualified to be a prophet? How do you think Jeremiah viewed his own qualifications?
- Have you ever sensed God calling you to a task or vocation for which you felt inadequate? How did you respond?

Exploration (25 minutes)

3. Examine the Call

Invite participants to read the first verse in Jeremiah 1, as well as the first verse in each of the following books of prophecy: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, and Micah. Note that the superscriptions for each of these books of prophecy place the prophecies in particular contexts, at particular times for particular audiences.

Ask someone to read aloud verses 4–10. Review with participants the key terms in the box on page 15, as well as William Holladay's observation on page 14 that the verbs "formed," "knew," and "consecrated" indicate a deeply intimate covenant relationship.

- Discuss question 3 on page 21. As you compare and contrast, also include the call of Gideon (Judg. 6:14–22).

4. Explore the Word of God

Point out for participants Robert Laha's contention that Jeremiah's call involved him in the political affairs of the day ("Pulling Down and Building Up," p. 17). Discuss the following question (included as a rhetorical question on p. 15):

- How would you like to be charged with the responsibility to speak God’s word to priests, kings, and nations (or the modern equivalent)?
- Discuss question 1 on page 20.
- What is the relationship between religion and politics in our society today? What should it be?

5. Examine Verbs of Contrast

On a sheet of newsprint, a chalkboard, or whiteboard, print the verbs listed at the bottom of page 17: “pluck up,” “pull down,” “destroy,” “overthrow,” “build,” and “plant.” Point out that Brueggemann suggests these words give “the essential shape of the book of Jeremiah” (in *To Pluck Up*, quoted on page 18 of the study guide). Discuss the following:

- The political and religious leaders of Jeremiah’s time persisted in the mistaken notion that God would protect them, no matter what. Instead, Judah and the Davidic dynasty would fall and the temple would be destroyed. In what ways do you see a parallel in the actions of our political and religious leaders today?
- Consider the six verbs from verse 10. To what aspects of our religious and political institutions might these verbs apply? Where do you see harbingers of doom? Signs of hope?
- Discuss question 4 on page 21.

Response (15 minutes)

6. Create Images for Today

Divide the group into two smaller working groups. Assign to one group the image of the almond tree and to the other the image of the boiling pot. Ask them to quickly read over the information related to their assigned image on page 18 through the top of page 20, as well as the verses in Jeremiah 1 that apply. Ask each group to come up with one or more images from our contemporary context that express the same meaning as the image from Jeremiah. Allow several minutes for the groups to work, and then invite them to briefly describe both Jeremiah’s image and the ones created by their group.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Engage in Guided Meditation on Scripture

Invite participants to find a comfortable position for sitting, to close their eyes, and to breathe in and out several times, centering themselves. Say that you will read Jeremiah 1:4–8 aloud. When you read verse 6, you will leave out the words “a boy” and pause for a few moments of reflection. Invite participants to silently consider what aspects of their own character or situation might make them feel inadequate to respond to God’s call. For example, participants might respond, “a retired person . . . a young adult . . . a person with little education . . . a woman with little access to power,” and so forth. After allowing time for silent reflection, you will read the verse again, and those who are willing can call out the phrases they used to end the sentence. Continue reading to the end of verse 9, pausing then to suggest to participants that they reflect on what words God might be putting in their mouths. End by reading verse 18.

8. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read unit 3 and Jeremiah 3:1–25 for the next session. Also ask them to jot down as many metaphors for God as they can. Invite two volunteers to present a short minilecture on the laws concerning divorce and on the image of Judah as a whore, using any information they can gather from biblical reference books.

3

Unfaithfulness (Jeremiah 3:1–25)

Key Idea: Through the metaphor of a broken marriage, Jeremiah's message reminds us of God's steadfast love that calls us from unfaithfulness back to the covenant of love.

Advance Preparation

- Post a sheet of newsprint on a wall, bulletin board, or table where participants can easily make notations.
- Obtain enough large sheets of poster board for the small-group work in activity 5.
- Also get colored felt-tipped markers and pencils. Bring either a yardstick and tape for each sign or yarn and a hole punch so that signs can be fashioned into two-sided signboards.

Opening (5 minutes)

As participants arrive, invite them to jot down on the newsprint any metaphors for God they listed as a part of their assignment for this session.

1. Pray Together

Pray the following or a prayer of your own choosing:

Gracious God, we yearn to know you even as we are known. We seek to be in closer relationship with you, even in the face of our own unfaithfulness. Make known your presence and your abiding love. Give us images and words for a Love that cannot be fully named. Call us to repent and return. Amen.

Presentation (20 minutes)

2. Explore Metaphors for God

Invite participants to call out the metaphors for God they listed on newsprint. Then analyze the list, categorizing which images are anthropomorphic and which are not. Present the information on pages 23–24 (“Excursus”). Ask:

- What does each image convey about God?
- Is it possible that an image may limit God or even be offensive to some? How?

Say that for some people, naming God as Father has become almost an idolatrous metaphor. This is because some people’s image of God is limited to that one name. For others, masculine imagery for God is offensive or oppressive. For some who were abused by a father, such an image can actually serve to cut them off from God. Others are put off by the use of feminine imagery for God. Ask:

- Can any one metaphor completely describe God? Why or why not?

3. Hear a Minilecture

Ask the participants who volunteered to present a minilecture on the laws of divorce and on the image of Judah as a whore using the reference materials. Ask:

- Why do you think Jeremiah uses the metaphor of a broken marriage to explain the relationship between the people and God?

Point out that in Deuteronomic law only the husband could set aside the wife in divorce. Ask:

- Suppose the metaphor for Judah is not that of a whore but of a philandering husband. Does the meaning change for you? How?

Teaching Tip: Chances are some of the participants in your group have experienced the pain of infidelity in marriage or the brokenness of divorce. Be aware that they will bring these experiences to any discussion of the metaphor Jeremiah uses.

Exploration (15 minutes)

4. Define Concepts: Return/Repent

Invite a volunteer to read aloud verses 12b–14 and 19–23 as the rest of the group listens for the word *return*. Point out that Laha says that according to Clements, the invitation to return (expressed by the Hebrew word *shub*) is one of the central doctrines in Jeremiah.

- Discuss questions 3 and 4 on page 27.

Point out the assertion of most scholars that the desire to return speaks of the desire for the reunion of the northern and southern kingdoms under the unified rule of Jerusalem. Ask:

- How would the invitation to return have been interpreted by scattered small groups of exiles? What kind of “return” do you think the heart of God is yearning for?
- Laha quotes Louis Stulmann, who says God is undomesticated and wild, like the lion Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. What does he mean? How do you respond?

Response (15 minutes)

5. Make Signs for a Prophet

Say that a stereotype sometimes portrayed in cartoons is that of the prophet standing on a street corner with a sign that says simply, “Repent!” Divide participants into small groups of three or four. Invite them to consider what words or phrases would express the kernel of Jeremiah’s message of repentance as it is stated in the passages read thus far. If we found Jeremiah on a street corner today, what message of repentance would be on his sign? Give each group a sheet of poster board and markers, and invite them to create such a sign.

When the groups have finished, invite each group to display and explain its message.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Sing a hymn

Sing “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #276).

7. Pray Together

Say that the following prayer is part of a service of marriage:

*God of mercy,
you have never broken your covenant with us,
and you free us to live together
in the power of your faithful love.
Amid all the changing words of our generation,
may we hear your eternal word that does not change.
Then may we respond to your gracious promises
with faithful and obedient lives;
through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Christian Marriage: The Worship of God, 26²

8. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read unit 4 and Jeremiah 6:16–21; 7:1–15.

- Ask for a volunteer who would be willing to prepare to present the temple sermon. Suggest that this person read over the sermon (7:2b–15) silently and then read it aloud several times, noting where to place dramatic emphasis. If your volunteer is agreeable, he or she might be costumed in biblical dress to present the sermon, but this is not necessary.
- Ask two or three participants to research the temple, using some of the reference books suggested in unit 4 or online.
- Ask the remaining participants to read 2 Samuel 24:18–25 and 1 Kings 5–6 for accounts of David's selection of the site of the temple and of Solomon's building of it.

2. *Christian Marriage: The Worship of God*, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 3, The Office of Worship for The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 26.

4

No Excuse, No Protection! (Jeremiah 6:16–21; 7:1–15)

Key Idea: Like the people of Judah, we mistakenly claim God’s protection even when our liturgies do not affect our ethics. When there is a disconnect between faith and practice, religious activities will not cover our sins.

Advance Preparation

- Check with the person who volunteered to present Jeremiah’s sermon to be sure he or she is prepared to do so. Or prepare to “preach” the sermon yourself (Jer. 7:2b–15), using the instructions in last session’s assignment. Obtain a biblical costume, if desired.
- If possible, continue to display the map of Judah in Old Testament times and the poster “Jeremiah’s Life and Times.”
- Obtain copies of a bulletin for your congregation’s service of worship that contain a prayer of confession. Or use the prayer of confession in the “Closing” activity, printing it on newsprint or a chalkboard or whiteboard so it can be easily read.
- You will need Bibles for the “Opening” activity and paper and pencils or pens for the “Response” activity.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Read a Psalm Responsively

Divide the group into two sections. Invite them to read Psalm 132 responsively.

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. Learn about the Temple

Invite those volunteers who researched the temple to report their findings. Ask someone to summarize what the passages in 2 Samuel

and 1 Kings reveal about the temple. Point out on the map the location of Shiloh and of Jerusalem. Then call participants' attention to the diagram of the temple on page 30. Say that Laha emphasizes that the leaders of Judah were promoting a theology of the temple, which saw the temple as the permanent residence of Yahweh. The people viewed this as proof that God's protection to those who supported the temple was guaranteed. The psalm the group read as an opening responsive reading reflects that belief.

3. Hear the Temple Sermon

Set the stage for the preaching by pointing out on the diagram the area that was the temple court, where Jeremiah would have been standing. Invite participants to imagine that they are worshipers entering the temple gate. There they are confronted by the prophet Jeremiah.

Now ask the volunteer to begin the sermon, or present it yourself.

Exploration (25 minutes)

4. Discuss Responses

Invite participants to discuss the following:

- The temple represented the religious faith of Israel. Is there a symbol or a location to which you can point that represents the Christian faith for you?
- Clements in *Jeremiah* (44) says that the Davidic kingship and the temple were not just religious symbols but also symbols of Israel's statehood. Are there places or buildings that you would identify as symbols of America?
- Some accounts indicate that the 9/11 hijackers identified the buildings they destroyed (and those they seemed to have planned to destroy, like the White House and the Capitol building) as symbols of America. What do you make of their choice of the World Trade Center?
- The people of Jeremiah's time believed that God would protect them no matter what their actions were. Some say that Americans believe similarly that "God is on our side." How would you respond?

5. Consider Worship

Ask participants to respond quickly to the following:

Worship is . . .

Jot down their responses on newsprint. Say that worship is defined as the work of the people. Often a service of worship ends with a charge to go forth in service, continuing the worship as work in the world.

- Discuss question 3 on page 34.

Say that Laha speaks of the “vain repetitions of the worshipers who intone the liturgy as if it were some sort of magic formula to ward off evil” (p. 31)

- Can you think of aspects of liturgy or elements of our faith life that we may sometimes use in the same way (the posting of the Ten Commandments or the push for prayer in schools, for instance)?

6. Discuss Faith and Practice

Invite a volunteer to read aloud the first five questions the writer poses at the bottom of page 33 and the top of page 34 (beginning with “How do we disobey God’s laws?” and ending with “How do we continue to claim special favor with God?”). Divide the group into five smaller groups or pairs of participants, and assign a question to each group or pair. Allow about five minutes for groups to discuss; then ask for responses.

Invite participants to reflect in silence as a volunteer reads the questions in the last paragraph of the unit.

Response (10 minutes)

7. Compose a Sermon for Today

Give each participant paper and pencil or pen. Say that you will read again the opening portion of the temple sermon. Then they will have the opportunity to write some “if” statements that would apply to us and to our culture today. Read aloud verses 2b–4, and allow several

minutes for participants to compose statements. Then read the verses aloud again, and invite those who are willing to read their statements. Close by reading verse 7 aloud.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Pray a Prayer of Confession

Pray together the prayer of confession from your own service of worship, or use the following prayer:

Almighty God, you love us, but we have not loved you; you call, but we have not listened. We walk away from neighbors in need, wrapped in our own concerns. We have gone along with evil, prejudice, warfare, and greed. Holy God, help us to face up to ourselves, so that as you move toward us in mercy, we may repent, turn to you, and receive forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Worshipbook, 26³

9. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read unit 5 and Jeremiah 8:18–9:3. Also ask that they research the fall of Judah and the fall of Israel and the subsequent exile to Babylon, using some of the biblical reference books suggested in this study and the Internet.

3. *Worshipbook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), altered, 26.

5

No Balm in Gilead (Jeremiah 8:18–9:3)

Key Idea: In contrast to the God of judgment who scatters the people into exile, Jeremiah reveals the God who grieves, God-with-us, foreshadowing the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Advance Preparation

- Review for yourself the history of the fall of Judah and the fall of Israel and the subsequent exile using one or more of the resources suggested in this study. Or check with your pastor for a reference book. A brief overview of the context of Jeremiah can be found in *Jeremiah* by Clements, pages 4–7.
- If you have access to either the hymnal *Sing the Faith* or the hymnal *A Singing Faith*, check to see if you would like to use the hymn “God Weeps” in the closing. Also gather hymnals containing the hymn “There Is a Balm in Gilead” and Bibles for each participant.
- Obtain newsprint, tape, and markers or a chalkboard and chalk or a whiteboard and dry-erase markers. Print on the newsprint, chalkboard, or whiteboard the words of Jeremiah 9:2 and Psalm 55:6–7.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Sing a Hymn

Sing “There Is a Balm in Gilead” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #394). The words to the refrain are also found in the box on page 37 in this study.

2. Read a Psalm

Invite participants to turn to Psalm 137. Point out the superscription of the psalm and say that this is a psalm of lament after the destruction of Jerusalem. Read the psalm aloud together, or ask for volunteers to read it, dividing the psalm at verse 7.

Presentation (20 minutes)

3. Learn about the Exile

Remind participants that readers of the book of Jeremiah already were experiencing the pain of exile, suffering the consequences of their turn away from God. Review the history of the fall of Judah and the fall of Israel and the subsequent exile, using the information found by participants in their research. Using the poster “Jeremiah’s Life and Times” or the sidebar on page 74, note relevant dates, events, and key figures such as Jehoiakim and Zedekiah.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. Expand Images of God

Ask:

- Thus far in our study of Jeremiah, how would you characterize God? What image of God is presented here?

Say that although there is little agreement among commentators as to who is actually speaking in today’s passage, Laha is opting to identify the speaker as God. Ask:

- What image of God is revealed in this passage?
- Invite participants to respond to question 1 on page 39 about God’s tears as a source of healing. Do they agree or disagree?

5. Engage in Dialogue

Ask participants to quickly scan the section “God: Sick at Heart” (pp. 36–37). Then divide the group into two sections to read the dialogical exchange in verses 18–21. An alternative is to ask for two volunteers to read the verses according to the outline on page 36. First suggest that the dialogue be read using the writer’s interpretation, that it is God who is speaking. Then invite the reading of the verses using the interpretation that it is the prophet speaking. How does this change the way participants hear the passage?

6. No Balm in Gilead

Ask participants to imagine situations, whether related to illness or to the state of the culture, where, as Laha says, “the disease is simply too widespread, too advanced for anything or anyone to turn back” (p. 37).

Ask:

- What situations in the world today strike you as too advanced, too far gone, to be healed?
- Respond to question 3 on page 39.

Ask someone to read the quote from John M. Bracke in the box on page 38. Ask:

- What is your response to Bracke’s observation that the God witnessed to in Scripture is a “God whose strength lies in a willingness to take risks, and whose power is suffering love”?
- Compare and contrast God’s weeping over Judah and Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem, as suggested in question 2 on page 39.

Response (10 minutes)

7. God-with-us?

Call the attention of participants to the two verses you displayed. Say that Laha observes that in today’s passage Jeremiah presents a picture of a God-with-us that foreshadows Jesus Christ. Yet in these two verses is a powerful image of a God who longs to get away from it all. Invite participants to discuss in pairs situations in the world or in our culture that might evoke just such a response from God. After allowing a few minutes for discussion, ask the pairs to name one or two situations that surfaced in their discussion. Then ask:

- What places can you identify where the church is perhaps absent or turning away from the wounds of the world?
- As Christ’s body in the world, what might be ways we can respond to reveal the incarnate God? Where do you see the church responding in such a way?

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Pray a Song

Ask participants to take a few moments to consider again those situations in our world that seem beyond healing and to bring them to God in prayer. Say that you will allow for a time of silence. Then the group will sing together the refrain to “There Is a Balm in Gilead.” Invite participants to offer petitions to God about those situations or persons they identified, imagining God’s healing tears on behalf of those persons and situations. Close by again singing the refrain.

Alternatively, sing or read the words of “God Weeps” as a prayer.

9. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read unit 6, “The Confessions of Jeremiah,” as well as Jeremiah 11:18–20:18. Also ask that they research the concept of covenant in biblical reference books or online.

6

The Confessions of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 11:18–20:18)

Key Idea: With Jeremiah, we ask the question of the ages: “Why was I born?” Through his poignant and powerful confessions, we struggle with how we too can be faithful to our calling.

Advance Preparation

- On separate sheets of construction paper, print the following questions, and post them around the learning space:

Why do the wicked prosper?

Why was I born?

Why is my pain unceasing? My wound uncurable, refusing to be healed?

- Also include some blank sheets.
- Make copies of the appendix found at the end of this leader’s guide titled “Participant Handout: Small-Group Discussion” for each participant.
- Obtain Bibles as well as paper and pencils or pens for the “Response” activity.

Opening (5 minutes)

As participants arrive, invite them to move around the room reading the questions you posted. Suggest that they jot down their names on the sheets with questions that are particularly troubling to them personally. On the blank sheets, they can record any additional questions they may have about the problem of evil.

1. Hear a Psalm of Lament

Say that the book of Psalms includes many psalms of lament in which the psalmist cries out to God, petitioning to God, asking for help, even seeking vengeance in ways very similar to those in the passages the group will be considering from Jeremiah. Invite the group to read in unison Psalm 13:1–4.

2. Pray Together

Use the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

God of the covenant, there are times when it seems as though your face is hidden from us. There are times when our own personal pain and sorrow dim our vision and fill our hearts. In the midst of times of suffering and doubt, open our eyes to your enduring presence. Amen.

Presentation (25 minutes)

3. Review the Idea of Covenant

Ask volunteers to look up and read aloud the following passages:

Genesis 9:8–17

Genesis 17:1–14

Joshua 24

Invite those who researched the concept of covenant to share what they found. If the following is not part of the information shared, briefly present it to the group:

Covenant is a solemn agreement initiated by God and entered into by humankind. God calls the people to be God's people, and they agree to love and serve only God. The covenant involves obligation to keep God's law and to live according to God's law, showing love and respect to God and to others of God's people. Humankind continually falls short of our covenant promises; God continually yearns for God's people to renew the covenant.

4. Introduce Jeremiah's Confessions

Briefly introduce this unit on the confessions of Jeremiah, using the information on pages 40–41. Then call the attention of participants to the questions you posted. Ask for a show of hands as to which questions they found especially troubling. Say that in these passages of Scripture, we have revealed a very human prophet. According to Clements, Jeremiah's sense of call did not in any way exonerate him from continued self-doubt and questioning.

Exploration (15 minutes)

5. Explore in Small Groups

Divide the group into five small groups or pairs. Give to each small group a copy of the appendix and assign one of the five Confessions to them to use as a guide for their discussion.

Allow ten minutes for the groups to work; then invite them to come back into the total group. Ask each group to choose one or more questions to which to respond or to report on a new learning or significant insight from their discussion.

Response (10 minutes)

6. Respond to Questions

Ask participants to silently read over questions 1, 3, and 4 on pages 49–50. Invite them to choose one of the three questions to which to respond. Distribute paper and pencils or pens, and ask them to write a response to that question. After allowing several minutes for them to work in silence, ask them to form groups based on the question they answered. Give them a few additional minutes to discuss their responses in the three groups.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Complete the Psalm

Ask participants to again open their Bibles to Psalm 13, the psalm of lament used in the “Opening” activity. Say that despite the despair evidenced in this psalm and others like it, and in Jeremiah’s confessions, there are often words of praise or trust even in the midst of despair. These verses affirm God’s steadfast love, a quality associated with God’s covenant with God’s people. Invite the group to read the final verses of the psalm in unison (5–6).

8. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 7, “Prophetic Signs,” and Jeremiah 13:1–11; 19; 32:6–32. Ask them as they read the Scripture passages to reflect on what kinds of images or symbols might be contemporary analogies for the loincloth, the pottery jug, and the purchase of the field.

Prophetic Signs (Jeremiah 13:1–11; 19; 32:6–32)

Key Idea: Through the signs of the loincloth, the pottery jug, and the purchase of the field, Jeremiah reveals a God who is sovereign and free to do what God wills to do, the One who wills life for the people of God even beyond exile and death.

Advance Preparation

- If possible, obtain a large terra cotta flowerpot and a hammer. Since the flowerpot will be a stand-in for the earthenware jug that is Jeremiah's image, use a pot that you won't mind breaking.
- Gather a variety of materials that can be used by small groups to present a contemporary sign-action, such as drawing paper, colored felt-tipped markers, simple props, poster board, construction paper, writing paper and pencils, and the like.
- Also prepare some road sign shapes by cutting yellow, white, and red construction paper into the appropriate shapes for signs: diamonds, hexagonal, and circular. Print the words "Stop" and "Yield" on a few.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Lead Off with Prayer

Pray the following or a prayer of your own choosing:

You give us prophets, holy God, to cry out for justice and mercy. Open our ears to hear them, and to follow the truth they speak, lest we support injustice to secure our own well-being. Give prophets the fire of your word, but love us well. Though they speak for you, may they know that they stand with us before you, and have no Messiah other than your Son, Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. Amen.

"For Those Who Fight for Social Justice," Worshipbook, 189⁴

4. Ibid., 189.

Presentation/Exploration (45 minutes)

2. Enact a Contemporary Sign-action

Divide the group into several smaller groups. Each group will be deciding on a way to present a sign-action that uses modern idioms to express the image of the loincloth. Encourage the groups to begin by reading the Scripture passage and the material in the unit on pages 51 to the top of 53. Suggest that they use the following questions and ideas as starters for their work:

- In a few sentences, describe what happens in the parable of the loincloth.
- What is the purpose of a loincloth? What is its significance?
- What is the significance of what Jeremiah does with the loincloth?
- What might be a contemporary metaphor for the loincloth?

Suggest to the groups that they might present the sign-action as a piece of street theater. Or they might write a parable or produce a series of posters that tell the story or even draw a cartoon.

Allow the groups twenty minutes or so to prepare their sign-actions and another ten minutes for presenting their work.

- Discuss questions 1 and 2 on page 56.

3. Break the Earthenware Jug

Ask for two volunteers: a reader and someone who will provide the action. Set the scene by summarizing the first two verses of chapter 19, pointing out that Laha compares the Potsherd Gate to a refuse dump or a landfill.

Invite the reader to read verses 1–9, 11–13, 15. The actor will break the flowerpot at the appropriate time. Then ask:

- What did you hear?
- What did you see?
- What images were most striking or horrific?
- What did the broken “jug” convey to you?

Discuss question 3 on page 56:

- To what do you think God is calling us to listen in our context today? Are there messages about which we are a stiff-necked people?

4. Discuss the Purchase of the Field

Call participants' attention to the writer's remark that this sign-action marks a major shift in the prophetic work of Jeremiah. Invite them to imagine they are in Jerusalem, and the situation is chaotic. Invite a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 32:1–5, which set the historical context.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Leviticus 25:25–31, the section of the law relevant to this passage. Say that this was a social device designed to maintain every person's property by the use of a redeemer, the one closest in kin to a person who could purchase his land to save it from going out of the hands of the family to whom it belonged. Read the following quote from Edward F. Campbell Jr.:

Redeemers . . . are to take responsibility for the unfortunate and stand as their supporters and advocates. They are to embody the basic principle of caring responsibility for those who may not have justice done for them by the unscrupulous, or even by the person who lives by the letter of the law.

Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction,
Notes, and Commentary, 136⁵

Point out that this sign of hope in the face of an unimaginably bad situation is a turning point in Old Testament prophecy. Discuss:

- What concrete signs of hope does the passage promise to the exiles?
- How might this passage be read by the Iraqi people? By the Palestinians? By people in our society facing the loss of homes or livelihoods?
- Discuss question 4 on page 56.

5. Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 136.

Response (5 minutes)

5. Create Signs of Hope

Remind participants of the “prophet signs” they created in the first session. Invite them to take the road sign shapes you prepared and to add to them words, phrases, and line drawings that would communicate a sign of hope for our society today. When they have completed their signs, display them around the learning space. Encourage participants to move around in silence reading the signs.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Sing a Hymn

Sing “Live Into Hope” or “Song of Hope” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #332, #432).

7. Read New Testament Scripture

Say that the words of Paul express the same kind of hope and trust in God’s purposes that are embodied in Jeremiah. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 8:31–39.

8. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read unit 8, “The Folly of Kings and False Prophets,” and Jeremiah 21–23. Also ask that they review the history of Jeremiah’s interactions with the rulers of Judah, using the information in unit 1. They could also review “Jeremiah’s Life and Times” on page 74 in unit 10.

The Folly of Kings and False Prophets (Jeremiah 21–23)

Key Idea: In Jeremiah’s time false prophets and monarchs pursuing their own aims were leading the people away from God. Embedded in Jeremiah’s message of judgment against the people is a hint of a new word of hope, for the people and for us.

Advance Preparation

- Gather hymnals with the suggested hymn, or choose another.
- Again display “Jeremiah’s Life and Times.”
- On newsprint, print the following:

Concrete poem: A poem written in the shape of its subject (for example, a poem about a dove written in the shape of a dove)

Cinquain: A five-line poem

Line 1: one word (a noun)

Line 2: two adjectives describing line 1

Line 3: three action verbs that relate to line 1

Line 4: four feeling words or a sentence that relates to line 1

Line 5: one word that is a synonym for line 1 or sums it up

Haiku: A seventeen-syllable poem (five syllables in line 1, seven in line 2, five in line 3)

- Also head another sheet of newsprint “Position Description: Ruler of Judah.” Under the title, print the following heads, leaving space under each for information to be added:

Position Description

Essential Job Tasks and Responsibilities

Required Skills, Talents, and Gifts

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Read a Psalm

Ask participants to turn to Psalm 101 and to note the superscription. In this psalm the king is pledging to rule the people with integrity and justice. Invite eight participants to read the psalm round-robin fashion, with each person reading one verse. If your group has fewer than eight participants, some may read more than one verse.

2. Read the Message to the House of David

Ask a volunteer to now read aloud Jeremiah 21:11–14, Jeremiah’s message from God to the house of David.

3. Sing a Hymn

Sing “O God of Every Nation” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #289).

Presentation (10 minutes)

4. Review the History

Ask participants to quickly review the history of Jeremiah’s interaction with the kings, using information from unit 1 and referring to the poster “Jeremiah’s Life and Times.”

Exploration (25 minutes)

5. Write a Job Description for a Ruler

Invite participants to reflect on the “job” of being a ruler. Discuss, using the information in the study and in the Scripture readings:

- What characteristics does Jeremiah consider essential in a ruler?
- What is lacking in the rulers with whom Jeremiah has been interacting?

- What qualities or actions in these rulers indicate that they have turned away from the covenant with Yahweh?
- What have these rulers and their people substituted for a “focus on the God the monarchy is supposed to serve” (see p. 58)?

Fill out the “Position Description” sheet you posted.

Ask a volunteer to read the sidebar on page 59. Discuss the following:

- Clements observes that a reliance on the house of David did not guarantee the people the unlimited protection of God. What institutions, such as government, or aspects of life, such as security, do we tend to rely on? In what ways might we be guilty of a false assurance of God’s protection, no matter what?

6. Beware the False Prophets

Invite volunteers to read aloud Deuteronomy 13:1–5 and 18:15–22. Also ask someone to read the sidebar on page 61. Discuss the following:

- Laha points out that in addition to adultery, Jeremiah accuses the false prophets of speaking “visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD” (see p. 61 of the study book). He describes their theology as self-serving, designed to please those in power. Where have you seen evidence today of religious or political leaders mouthing a self-serving theology?
- Discuss questions 3 and 4 on page 63.

Response (15 minutes)

7. Offer a Hint of Hope

Say that Laha comments that there is no denying that the predominant message in chapters 21–23 is that of judgment against the ruler, the false prophets, and those who listen to them.

Remind participants that most often we hear readings that lift up the “righteous Branch” during Advent, when the connotation is clearly to the coming of Jesus Christ.

On newsprint, make two columns, one headed with “Remnant of My Flock” and the other with “Righteous Branch.” Invite participants to brainstorm words suggested by the passage or by the unit for each of these phrases.

Distribute paper and pencils or pens. Call participants’ attention to the descriptions of the three forms of poetry you posted on newsprint. Invite them to write a haiku, a cinquain, or a concrete poem on one or both of the phrases.

After allowing several minutes to work, ask for volunteers to read their poems.

Teaching Tip: These three forms of poetry offer a variety of poetic expressions. Concrete poetry offers to those who may feel intimidated by poetry a very simple, nonthreatening way to approach the response. The cinquain is another structured form. Those who enjoy a challenge will find the haiku a better fit.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Read a Litany

Invite participants to join you in a litany.

Leader: O God, your justice is like a rock, and your mercy like pure flowing water. Judge and forgive us. If we have turned from you, return us to your way; for without you we are lost people. From brassy patriotism and a blind trust in power;

People: **Deliver us, O God.**

Leader: From public deceptions that weaken trust; from self-seeking in high political places;

People: **Deliver us, O God.**

Leader: From divisions among us of class or race; from wealth that will not share, and poverty that feeds on the food of bitterness;

People: Deliver us, O God.

Leader: From neglecting rights; from overlooking the hurt, the imprisoned, and the needy among us;

People: Deliver us, O God.

Leader: From a lack of concern for other lands and peoples; from narrowness of national purpose; from failure to welcome the peace you promise on earth;

People: Deliver us, O God.

"Litany for the Nation," Worshipbook, 128⁶

9. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read unit 9, "A Letter to the Babylonian Exiles," and Jeremiah 29:1–23. Ask for one or two volunteers to research the Jewish holiday Tisha B'av at <http://www.jewfaq.org/holidayd.htm> and for others to research the situation of the exiles in Babylon using some of the suggested reference books or going online.

6. "Litany for the Nation," *Worshipbook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 128.

9

A Letter to the Babylonian Exiles (Jeremiah 29:1–23)

Key Idea: In Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles is captured the heart of his ministry: to announce God’s judgment. Yet judgment is not the last word, either for the people or for us.

Advance Preparation

- Obtain Bibles and hymnals that contain a number of spirituals.
- Also get paper and pencils or pens for the “Response” activity.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Hear Scripture

Tell participants that the five poems in the book of Lamentations are read in Jewish synagogues on the ninth day of the fifth month of the Jewish calendar, the month of Av, when the destruction of the temple is commemorated. Ask those who researched the holiday Tisha B’av to tell a little about it. Then invite participants to listen as you (or a volunteer or volunteers) read Lamentations 1:1–5.

2. Pray Together

Pray the following or a prayer of your own choosing:

Gracious God, you have promised that if we seek you with all our hearts our search will not be in vain. Be with us as we seek to encounter you in your Word. Warm our hearts and quicken our desire to serve you more fully. Amen.

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. Explore the Situation in Exile

Invite participants who researched the situation of the exiles in Babylon to report their findings. Point out the adjustments the exiles had

to make from practicing a faith that had been rooted in a land given to them by God and to a temple that has been the center of religious practice. Their relatively modest, agricultural lifestyle was overshadowed by the more sophisticated Babylonian culture. Their own temple lay in ruins, but in contrast they could see the lavish temples of Babylonia. With a faith rooted in a particular place, they must have wondered how they could be faithful Jews in a foreign land, a sentiment expressed poignantly in Psalm 137.

Also call the attention of participants to the sidebar on page 67. Ask:

- In what ways did the exiles adjust the practice of their faith?

Exploration (30 minutes)

4. Hear Jeremiah's Message to the Exiles

Ask someone to read aloud Jeremiah 29:4–14. Ask:

- What is surprising to you about this message? Do you find it realistic, or hopeful, or both?
- What does Jeremiah mean when he says in verse 13, “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart”?
- Discuss questions 2 and 3 on page 70.

5. Explore the Metaphor of Exile

Tell participants that Brueggemann suggests that exile is a helpful metaphor for understanding our current faith situation in the United States and for exploring new ways to be church. In *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among the Exiles*, he comments:

The exiled Jews of the Old Testament were of course geographically displaced. More than that, however, the exiles experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world which gave them meaning and coherence, and they found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked, trivialized or dismissed. Faith is not primarily geographic, but it is social, moral and cultural.⁷

7. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among the Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 2.

Discuss the following:

- In a consumer culture undergirded by military patriotism, Brueggemann sees Christians as increasingly resident aliens in their own culture. How do you respond?
- Discuss question 1 on page 70.
- In reference to the false prophets and their message, Laha comments on page 67, “Jeremiah wants the people of Judah to face the reality of exile rather than to focus all of their attention on the illusion of a quick escape proffered by the false prophets.” Are there false prophets in our society or in our religious institutions today? What messages are they offering as a quick fix to our metaphorical experience of exile?

6. Read of Hope and Future Promises

Distribute hymnals to the participants. Invite them to use the index to locate examples of African American spirituals. Invite them to scan the lyrics to find examples of expressions of hope. After allowing several minutes, ask them to read lyrics they found. Then discuss:

- How do you think spirituals buttressed the hope of enslaved people for the future in the face of present oppression?

Remind participants that many spirituals included coded messages of resistance and so offered hope through concrete and subversive actions.

- Discuss question 4 on page 70.

Response (10 minutes)

7. Interpret Jeremiah as Messengers

Call participants’ attention to the top of page 65. Laha comments there that “in antiquity, such letters were not simply passed on in the form in which they were received. They were embellished and interpreted by the messengers who carried them and who read them to the people.”

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Invite participants to imagine they have been entrusted with the task of being the messenger who delivers Jeremiah's letter to the exiles. Ask them to again read over the letter and to add whatever embellishment or interpretation they would like. They can rewrite the entire letter or choose particular parts they would like to interpret.

After allowing a few minutes, ask for a few volunteers to present Jeremiah's letter to the "exiles."

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Hear Words of Hope

Invite participants to again turn to Lamentations and read in unison Lamentations 3:19–24.

9. Sing a Hymn

Sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #276).

10. Give an Assignment

Ask participants to read unit 10, "The Little Book of Consolation," and Jeremiah 30–31.

10

The Little Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30–31)

Key Idea: Judgment is not God’s final word. God’s ultimate word, for Judah and for us, is hope, comfort, and restoration.

Advance Preparation

- Locate the scrolls participants made during the study of unit 1. Place them in a basket on a worship table in the front of the room.
- Also display the newsprint sheet from unit 1 on which you recorded participants’ responses to the open-ended prompt, “My hope for this study is . . .”
- On newsprint, print the following: “pluck up,” “pull down,” “destroy,” “overthrow,” “build,” and “plant.”
- Also print the phrase “God’s love . . .” in the center of another sheet of paper.
- From red construction paper, cut enough heart shapes that each participant can have at least one. They will also need pens or fine-line, felt-tipped markers.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Use a Responsive Reading

Divide participants into two groups for a responsive reading of Jeremiah 31:2–14.

2. Pray Together

Pray the following or a prayer of your own choosing:

Gracious God, we give thanks that you have loved us with an everlasting love and that your faithfulness endures. Indeed you turn our mourning into joy; you comfort and give us gladness where there was sorrow. Though our failings are many, call us anew to be your faithful people as we conclude our study. Amen.

Presentation/Exploration (35 minutes)

3. Explore Grace and Law

Call participants' attention to the words you posted on newsprint. Remind them that Brueggemann comments that these words give "essential shape" to the book of Jeremiah. Referring to the material in the text on pages 72–74 and to Jeremiah 30, discuss the following:

- What institutions and social systems of Judah and Israel have been plucked up, pulled down, destroyed, or overthrown? Which of our own institutions or social systems seem to you to be deserving of God's judgment?
- In what ways does God promise in this passage to build and to plant? What hope do you have for a similar renewal in our culture?
- Laha refers to Clements's observation that law and grace are to be held in creative tension. How do you respond?

4. Recall God's Love for Israel

Refer participants to the information in "Hope for the Future: Jeremiah 31:15–22" (pp. 77–78). Say that Clements has observed the following:

By blending together these domestic images of a home broken and disturbed by the loss and departure of children and the rejoicing at their return, the prophet portrays the intensity and nature of God's love for [God's] people. . . . Human relationships, which are of necessity only a partial and imperfect guide to the nature of God, may nevertheless be the most helpful and significant witnesses to the being of God that we possess.

Interpretation, Jeremiah, 186–87

Invite participants to read the story of the Prodigal Son and his brother in Luke 15:11–32. Ask them to call out words or phrases that come to mind about the character of God's love as revealed in both the *Jeremiah* passage and in Luke. Record their responses on the newsprint sheet.

5. The New Covenant

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 31:31–34. Refer participants to page 79. Ask:

- How is this new law to be defined and shaped? What distinguishes it from the old law?
- What was the basis of the people's hope to be in the future?

Response (10 minutes)

6. Form a Response to the New Covenant

Invite participants to take from the basket the scroll they made in the first session. Distribute the construction paper hearts and pens or markers. Ask participants to open their scrolls and read what they wrote in the first session (a question, comment, or reflection on what situations and events need a prophetic word today). Then suggest that they think about a response they might make to that situation or event that would reflect a new commitment to God's call that we act as God's people.

Suggest that they take scroll and heart home as a reminder that God's covenant is written on their hearts.

Closing (10 minutes)

7. Review the study

Point out the newsprint sheet from the first session about participants' hopes for the study. Ask:

- In what ways were your hopes for the study fulfilled?
- What further study or reflection might expand your learning?
- Where did you experience frustration?
- Where were signs of hope? Evidences of grace?

Invite someone to read aloud the final two paragraphs of the study, page 81.

8. Sing a hymn

Sing “When We Are Living” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #400) or one of the hymns from the previous sessions.

9. Pray Scripture

Invite participants to join you in a cumulative reading of Romans 8:38–39.

- Reader 1:** For I am convinced that neither death,
nor life,
- Readers 1 and 2:** Nor angels, nor rulers,
- Readers 1, 2, 3:** Nor things present, nor things to come,
- Readers 1, 2, 3, 4:** Nor powers,
- Readers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5:** Nor height, nor depth,
- Readers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6:** Nor anything else in all creation,
- All:** Will be able to separate us from the love
of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen.**

Appendix

Participant Handout: Small-Group Discussion

Small Group 1: Jeremiah 11:18–12:6

1. Read the passage aloud, noting Jeremiah's laments and God's responses.
2. Discuss:
 - What did you find surprising about Jeremiah's words and God's responses?
 - According to Clements (*Jeremiah*, 82), Jeremiah's family may have been influenced by the perception that Jeremiah's repeated warnings of doom were unpatriotic. The threats to his family can be seen as efforts to silence his apparent treason, which would have been dangerous to his family. In what ways might there be parallels today when prophetic words stand over against popular conceptions of patriotism?
 - Discuss question 2 on page 50. How do you react to the implication that our calling as Christians may involve sacrifice?

Small Group 2: Jeremiah 15:10–21

1. Read the passage aloud, noting Jeremiah's words and God's response.
2. Discuss the following:
 - Clements suggests that Jeremiah was in emotional turmoil in part over "the prophetic understanding of the divine justice and divine mercy" (97) and how they can be reconciled. How would you say the two can be reconciled?
 - Are you surprised at Jeremiah's words to God in verses 16–18? Have you ever had similar feelings about God in the face of personal crisis?
 - How do you respond to God's words of reassurance in the face of Jeremiah's despair in verses 19–21?

Small Group 3: Jeremiah 17:14–18

1. Read the passage aloud, noting Jeremiah's words and their similarity to the psalm of lament in the "Opening" activity.
2. Discuss the following:
 - Clements notes that shame here implies not just social embarrassment but an overwhelming demonstration of being in the wrong. Jeremiah longs to be vindicated, but God does not respond. What instances can you cite of contemporary Christians who may have spoken prophetically in the face of ridicule? In what ways might you have experienced this?
 - Unlike the earlier passage where Jeremiah is compared to a lamb led to slaughter, here he speaks of not running away from his role as a shepherd in God's service. In what ways have the people of Israel been like obstinate sheep?
 - When have you experienced times of despair when you were unable to sense God's healing presence? What things seemed to be blocking you?

Small Group 4: Jeremiah 18:18–23

1. Read the passage aloud, noting Jeremiah's words and their similarity to the psalm of lament in the "Opening" activity.
2. Discuss the following:
 - What is surprising to you about Jeremiah's words?
 - Clements observes that the God of Israel was not to be thought of as a national God and that it was a mistake to think of God in terms of power reserved to protect God's people, rather than in terms of love and righteousness (*Jeremiah*, 117). God is not an exclusively national deity. In what ways is this view of God revealed in our own national life? How, in your opinion, can Christians witness to the God of Creation rather than the God of America?
 - Laha says that Jeremiah is pleading here for justice without any sense of mercy. Is there a contradiction between justice and mercy?

Small Group 5: Jeremiah 20:7–18

1. Read the passage aloud, noting Jeremiah's words and their similarity to the psalm of lament in the "Opening" activity.
2. Discuss the following:
 - Laha asserts that here Jeremiah "'spills his guts' in a way unparalleled in all the Bible" (47–48). What surprises you about his words? Have you ever experienced similar feelings toward God?
 - Clements observes that this is a great turning point in prophecy, in which Jeremiah's success as a prophet is not to be measured in his success in getting the people to turn away from their evil ways but in his own constancy in witnessing to the Creator of the Universe (123–24). How do you think you might respond to being ridiculed for witnessing to your faith?
 - Laha writes, "If Jeremiah is any indication, faithfulness to God . . . does not necessarily lead one to happiness" (48). How do you respond?