

Homiletics Analysis: Jeremiah 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Jeremiah 5 is a sustained prosecutorial indictment of Judah, structured as a divine search for a single righteous person in Jerusalem (vv. 1–9), followed by a catalogue of the nation’s willful covenant defection (vv. 10–31). The LORD commands a search of Jerusalem’s streets — if even one person who deals honestly and seeks truth can be found, He will pardon the city (v. 1). None is found. The poor plead ignorance (v. 4); the great are worse — they have deliberately broken the yoke of the LORD’s covenant (vv. 4–5). Wild beasts stand ready to devour because the transgressions are many (v. 6). The people have committed adultery and prostitution with false gods (vv. 7–9). The indictment sharpens in the second movement: the people have denied that the LORD speaks through the prophets, calling His word mere wind (v. 13); they have broken covenant and served foreign gods (v. 19); they have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear (v. 21). The LORD has set the sand as a boundary for the sea — an act of sovereign ordering — and yet His people refuse to fear the One who controls creation (vv. 22–24). Their iniquity has withheld the rains and the harvest (v. 25). The wealthy prey on the poor (vv. 26–28). The chapter closes with a devastating rhetorical question: “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so. But what will you do when the end comes?” (vv. 30–31).

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through Jeremiah 5 is to shatter the comfortable self-deception of a people who have confused religious identity with covenant faithfulness. The chapter exposes, layer by layer, that Israel’s failure is not ignorance but willful rebellion — in their worship (idolatry), their ears (refusing the word), their eyes (hardened perception), and their social life (exploitation of the poor). The chapter’s closing question is not rhetorical decoration — it is a final, urgent crack in the wall of complacency: *what will you do when the end comes?* God is seeking to produce in the reader a recognition of the depth of their own covenant defection and a holy fear of the One whose word they have domesticated, whose creation they have refused to read, and whose judgment they have dismissed as impossible.

Subject Sentence: Judah’s wholesale covenant betrayal invites certain divine judgment from the God who cannot be deceived.

Primary Claim: God is confronting His people with the full depth of their self-deception — not merely that they have sinned, but that they have systematically suppressed every faculty and every witness that could have recalled them — and He is pressing them toward honest self-recognition before the end comes.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Search for One Righteous Person (vv. 1–5)

A common reading, particularly in popular and evangelical preaching, treats verses 1–5 as parallel to Genesis 18 (Abraham’s intercession for Sodom) — as if God is genuinely uncertain whether a righteous remnant exists and is conducting a hopeful search. This reading is too optimistic about the scene’s tone. The literary structure of the passage makes clear that the search is forensic, not hopeful — God is building a legal case, not issuing an open invitation. The verdict is already disclosed in the structure: the poor are without knowledge (v. 4), the great have deliberately broken the yoke (v. 5). Both classes fail. The rhetorical search is meant to expose the totality of the failure, not express divine uncertainty. The Reformed reading is correct: this is covenant lawsuit language (*rib* pattern), in which the divine plaintiff establishes grounds for judgment by demonstrating the comprehensive nature of the defendant’s guilt.

“The Poor Do Not Know / The Great Have Broken the Yoke” (vv. 4–5)

Some Wesleyan and liberation-theology readings emphasize verse 4 as exonerating the poor — they are victims of structural inequality and thus cannot be held to the same standard. This reading imports modern sociological categories into a text that does not support them. The text does not exonerate the poor — it explains their failure while making clear that the great, who have no such excuse, are even more culpable. The point is not a two-tiered moral standard but a two-tiered indictment: if even those with full knowledge and position have broken the covenant, no class of Judah has remained faithful. Both are condemned, though the culpability of the informed is greater.

The Prophets’ Word as “Wind” (v. 13)

This verse records Judah’s accusation against the prophets — that their warnings are mere wind with no substance. Some commentators treat this as a secondary issue (the false prophets problem) — that the people are correct to distrust *some* prophets and have merely generalized. The contextual reading is more severe: the people have dismissed *all* prophetic warning, including the LORD’s genuine word through Jeremiah, precisely because they prefer prophets who prophesy “peace” (cf. v. 31). This is the Amos 8 and 2 Timothy 4:3 problem — people who have actively curated a religious environment that flatters them. The Reformed reading emphasizes this as a symptom of deep spiritual hardening, not merely confusion about which prophets to trust.

“My People Love to Have It So” (v. 31)

This phrase is theologically decisive and is sometimes softened in evangelical exposition — read as though the people have merely drifted into a situation they passively inherited. The text is explicit: *love* (*'āhab*). This is not passive accommodation; it is active desire. The people have affectionately embraced a religious order that makes no demands on them. Arminian readings that emphasize human responsibility without total depravity can acknowledge the verb's force, but tend to stop short of the Reformed conclusion: that this love for comfortable religion is itself evidence of a heart that has been given over (cf. Romans 1:24, 26, 28) — God not merely permitting but judicially handing the people over to their own desires. This judicial dimension is essential for the passage's weight to register.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 18:22–33** — Abraham's intercession for Sodom sets the pattern: a search for righteous persons as grounds for pardon. Jeremiah 5:1 invokes this pattern but inverts its outcome — Sodom could not produce ten; Jerusalem cannot produce one, and no advocate arises to prevent judgment.
 - **Deuteronomy 28:15–25** — The covenant curses directly ground the chapter's threats: withheld rain (v. 25), military invasion (v. 15–17), and exile all flow from the covenant sanctions Judah accepted at Sinai. Jeremiah 5 is not novel — it is the fulfillment of what was always promised.
 - **Amos 8:11–12** — The famine of hearing the word of the LORD: a parallel judgment for a people who have suppressed and dismissed prophetic warning. Jeremiah 5:13 and Amos 8 together show that refusing the word does not silence it — it transforms it from nourishment into judgment.
 - **Romans 1:18–32** — The theological grounding for Jeremiah 5's hardening sequence: suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, refusing to honor God as Creator (cf. Jer. 5:22–24), and being given over to desires. "My people love to have it so" (v. 31) maps precisely onto Paul's three-stage judicial handing over (vv. 24, 26, 28).
 - **Revelation 3:14–22 (Laodicea)** — The church that is neither hot nor cold, that has become comfortable and self-satisfied in its religious life, echoes Judah's condition in Jeremiah 5. Both texts end with a question that demands a response before the final accounting arrives.
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Aim: To expose the reader's own capacity for sophisticated religious self-deception — the same suppression of word, conscience, and creation-witness that condemned Judah — and to produce genuine fear of the God who sees through all of it.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	LORD commands: search Jerusalem for one honest, truth-seeking person — if found, He will pardon	Forensic search; echoes Gen. 18; outcome already implied
2	They swear “As the LORD lives” but swear falsely	Religious language masking covenant betrayal
3	LORD’s eyes look for truth; they were struck but felt no anguish; refused to take correction	Discipline has failed; hardening is advanced
4	The prophet/narrator excuses the poor: they do not know the LORD’s way	Explanatory; not exoneration — sets up contrast with v. 5
5	The great have broken the yoke and burst the bonds	Greater knowledge, greater culpability; total indictment of both classes
6	Lion, wolf, leopard — judgment threatens from every direction; transgressions are many, apostasies great	Covenant curse imagery; wild beasts as divine agents
7–8	“How can I pardon you?” — they have abandoned God, sworn by non-gods, committed adultery, prostitution	God’s rhetorical question grounds the impossibility of pardon
9	“Shall I not punish them? Shall I not avenge myself?”	Covenant justice is certain; the rhetorical question expects “yes”
10–11	Command to destroy branches but not the whole; Israel and Judah have been faithless	Partial judgment preserves the remnant; faithlessness is described as betrayal
12–13	The people say: God will not act against us; the prophets speak wind, not the LORD’s word	The self-deception is named explicitly: denial of prophetic word and divine judgment
14	God’s response: His word	The word they dismissed will

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15–17	will be fire and the people wood; it will consume them A distant nation (Babylon) will come — ancient, enduring, speaking an unknown tongue; devouring everything	become the instrument of their destruction The judgment is concrete, historical, total — no mere threat
18–19	“Yet even in those days I will not make a full end” — a question asked and answered: why? Because they served foreign gods	Grace preserves a remnant; the exile is explained as covenant consequence
20–21	Declare in Judah and Jerusalem: “Hear this... O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear”	Ezekiel 12 / Isaiah 6 resonance; spiritual blindness is the diagnostic
22–24	“Do you not fear me?” — God who set the sand boundary for the sea is not feared; rains withheld	Creator’s authority and order refused by those who depend on Him
25	“Your iniquities have turned these away; your sins have kept good from you”	Covenant curse logic: sin has material consequences
26–29	The wicked set traps; the poor and needy are not defended; shall I not punish for these?	Social injustice as covenant violation; exploitation grounds divine prosecution
30–31	“An appalling and horrible thing: prophets prophesy falsely, priests rule at their direction, my people love to have it so. What will you do when the end comes?”	Climactic indictment; the passive/active language is decisive — “love to have it so”

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9	The Search and the Verdict:

Division	Verses	Label
2	10–19	No One Deals Honestly The Word Dismissed and the Judgment Confirmed
3	20–24	Eyes That Do Not See: Refusing the Witness of Creation
4	25–29	Iniquity’s Fruit: Withheld Good and Unpunished Exploitation
5	30–31	The Final Indictment: They Love to Have It So

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Judah’s wholesale covenant betrayal invites certain divine judgment from the God who cannot be deceived.

Primary Claim: God is confronting His people with the full depth of their self-deception — not merely that they have sinned, but that they have systematically suppressed every faculty and every witness that could have recalled them — and He is pressing them toward honest self-recognition before the end comes.

Applications (Five)

1. Reexamine the religious vocabulary you use to hide from God. (*Mind/Belief*) Judah swore “As the LORD lives” while living in open defiance of everything the LORD required (v. 2). Religious language is the most sophisticated form of self-deception available, precisely because it uses the vocabulary of relationship to disguise its absence. The application is not “be more sincere” — it is to identify the specific phrases, habits, and practices you use to perform fidelity while avoiding its cost. What do you say about God in public that your private life contradicts? The LORD is not impressed by the formula; He is searching for the person.

2. Hear the word you have been calling wind. (*Mind/Belief*) The people of Judah did not reject Scripture loudly and openly — they domesticated it by dismissing the inconvenient parts as overheated rhetoric (v. 13). Every reader has portions of the biblical witness they have quietly filed under “that doesn’t apply to me” or “that preacher is too extreme.” The Primary Claim of this passage requires asking: which word from God have you been privately dismissing? Which command, warning, or promise have you heard so many times

without responding that it has lost its power to disturb you? The word that feels like wind is frequently the word most precisely aimed at you.

3. Let creation's order produce genuine fear of God. (*Affections/Worship*) God points to the sand boundary He set for the sea as a ground for fear (vv. 22–24): the same God who holds the ocean in place is the One whose covenant you are violating. Modern readers have lost the instinct to move from creation to Creator, from physical order to moral accountability. The application is not intellectual — it is worshipful. Stop and observe something in creation this week that is reliably beyond your control: weather, ocean, growth, death. Let it produce what Judah refused to feel — genuine fear of the living God who orders all of it, before whom your own life is entirely open.

4. Stop being comfortable in a church that makes no demands on you. (*Affections/Worship*) “My people love to have it so” (v. 31) is one of the most spiritually diagnostic lines in the Old Testament. Judah's problem was not that false prophets existed — it was that the people *loved* them, because false prophets told them what they wanted to hear. The contemporary equivalent is not choosing between obvious good and obvious evil — it is the slow, comfortable drift toward churches, teachers, and religious content that consistently confirms you without ever confronting you. If your entire religious diet leaves you feeling validated and never disturbed, you are probably not hearing the word of God — you are hearing your own desires amplified.

5. Defend the people your society is set up to exploit. (*Will/Behavior*) Verses 26–29 are precise: the wicked set traps and grow fat; the poor and needy have no advocate; no one pleads their case. This is not background texture — it is covenant violation. The people of God are called to be the community where exploitation does not flourish unchallenged. The application demands specificity: who in your concrete, local context is being systemically overlooked, preyed upon, or trapped? Name them. Not a category of people — actual people in your neighborhood, workplace, or city. And identify one thing you can do this week that moves you from passive awareness to active advocacy.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Jeremiah 5 teaches that God is a God of total perception — nothing in Judah's religious performance, theological vocabulary, or social life escapes His scrutiny. His knowledge is not general (“they sinned”) but forensic and comprehensive — He has searched the streets, catalogued the classes, examined the prophets, assessed the priests, and read the desires of the people's hearts. The chapter also teaches that God's judgment is coherent with His character — He does not punish arbitrarily, but as the covenant LORD whose moral order sustains creation itself (vv. 22–24). That the sand obeys and the people do not is not merely ironic — it is a theological statement about where the fault of disorder lies. Finally, the chapter teaches that God speaks the truth about human beings even when no human being is willing to — the very comprehensiveness of this

indictment is itself a form of grace, because a God who would lie to us about our condition would not be worth trusting for salvation.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Jeremiah 5 provides one of the Old Testament's most complete portraits of total depravity — not as abstract doctrine but as observed, demonstrated reality. Both the poor and the great fail (vv. 4–5); no faculty is undamaged — not the mouth (v. 2), not the will (v. 3), not the eyes (v. 21), not the ears (v. 21), not the affections (v. 31). This is precisely what Reformed theology means by total depravity: not that human beings are as bad as they could be, but that sin has touched every aspect of the human being and every class of human society, leaving no corner from which a righteousness sufficient for pardon can emerge. The passage also displays divine sovereignty in judgment: God is not merely observing Judah's sin and warning about consequences — He is actively directing the judgment (the beasts of v. 6, the northern nation of vv. 15–17) as the sovereign covenant Lord. And the preserved remnant of verse 18 — “yet even in those days I will not make a full end” — is the gospel thread running through the wrath: the God who judges comprehensively is also the God who preserves graciously, not because Israel deserves it, but because His covenant purposes cannot be finally defeated.

Main Takeaway

You have more in common with Judah than you want to admit — not because you are obviously wicked, but because you, like them, have learned to use the right language, observe the right practices, and attend the right gatherings, all while keeping God at exactly the distance that costs you nothing. What God is saying in this chapter, He is saying directly to you: *I have searched and I see what is actually there. The word you called wind was my voice. The creation you admire without fearing was my signature. The comfort you love in religion was your own reflection.* What will you do when the end comes?

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating this chapter as “about Israel” rather than about every covenant community.** Jeremiah 5 is not a history lesson about ancient Judah's spiritual failure — it is a covenant lawsuit template that applies wherever a people has received God's word, taken on the marks of covenant membership, and then domesticated both. The preacher who keeps this chapter safely in the sixth century BC has done exactly what Judah's false prophets did: kept the word away from the people who need it. The passage must land in the present tense.

- **Preaching verse 1 as an optimistic invitation rather than a forensic indictment.** The search for one righteous person is not an altar call. It is a legal demonstration of comprehensive guilt. If the sermon frames it as “God is looking for someone to stand in the gap — will you be that person?” it has misread the tone entirely and converted prosecution into recruitment. The outcome of the search is predetermined by the text’s own movement: no one is found, and the judgment proceeds.
- **Softening “my people love to have it so” (v. 31) into passive drift.** The Hebrew *’āhab* is the same verb used for love of God, love of neighbor, love of wisdom — it is an affective, active, and morally weighted word. To preach this as mere complacency or cultural accommodation misses the diagnosis entirely. The people are not victims of bad religious leadership; they are *enthusiastic consumers* of it. This distinction is critical for the application: the problem is not that false prophets exist, but that we love them.
- **Omitting the creation-witness section (vv. 22–24) as tangential.** These verses are not a nature detour. They establish the epistemological ground of the indictment: Judah cannot plead ignorance of God’s authority, because creation itself has been preaching it continuously. The sand obeys; the people will not. This makes the rebellion inexcusable and grounds the fear-of-God application in observable reality rather than abstraction. Skip it, and you lose one of the passage’s most powerful diagnostic tools.
- **Preaching the social justice section (vv. 26–29) in isolation from the theological indictment.** Preachers with a social-justice emphasis may be drawn to verses 26–29 and tempted to preach them as a standalone imperative about caring for the poor. This is not wrong in itself, but the passage frames the exploitation of the poor as covenant violation — an offense against the LORD who is the advocate of the poor, not merely an ethical failure or structural injustice. Detaching the social application from the theological ground produces activism without worship, which the chapter itself would diagnose as its own form of self-sufficiency.
- **Failing to end with the urgency of verse 31’s closing question.** “What will you do when the end comes?” is not a rhetorical flourish — it is the chapter’s climactic demand. A sermon that ends with the diagnosis of Judah’s failure without pressing this question onto the listener has left the courtroom without a verdict. The listener must be brought to the point where that question is genuinely theirs to answer: not Judah’s future, but mine — now.