

Homiletics Analysis: Jeremiah 9

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Jeremiah 9 opens in the midst of sustained lamentation. The prophet's grief is so overwhelming that he wishes he could flee into the wilderness to escape the moral corruption of his people (vv. 1–6). The LORD then takes up His own speech, explaining the necessity of judgment: the tongue is a weapon of deceit, neighbor cannot trust neighbor, the whole social fabric has been woven from lies (vv. 7–11). A wisdom interlude follows, asking who is wise enough to understand why the land has become a ruin — and answering that the people have forsaken the Torah and served other gods (vv. 12–16). The LORD then calls for the professional mourning women to raise a lament, because death has climbed into the windows and cut down the young men; the corpses will lie like dung in the open field (vv. 17–22). The chapter then pivots dramatically at verse 23 to one of its most theologically significant moments: the LORD commands that no one boast in wisdom, strength, or riches — the three great human confidence systems — but only in *this*: that one knows and understands the LORD, who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth (vv. 23–24). The chapter closes with a brief oracle announcing judgment on all the circumcised-in-flesh who are uncircumcised in heart — Israel included, standing in a list alongside Egypt, Edom, Ammon, and Moab (vv. 25–26).

This Text — Intent

God is doing two things simultaneously in Jeremiah 9, and the relationship between them is the key to the chapter's purpose. First, He is dismantling every confidence system His people have erected in place of knowing Him — social trust has collapsed (vv. 1–11), natural wisdom cannot explain the disaster (vv. 12–16), death is coming regardless of strength or numbers (vv. 17–22), and outward religious marking cannot protect the uncircumcised heart (vv. 25–26). Second, and precisely through that dismantling, He is exposing what the only legitimate ground of human boasting is: knowing and understanding the LORD who does steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. God is seeking to produce in the reader a radical reorientation — away from every substitute source of identity, security, and glory, and toward the knowledge of God as the one thing worth having. The grief of verses 1–22 is not the chapter's destination; it is the diagnostic that makes verses 23–24 land with full force.

Subject Sentence: When all false grounds of boasting are stripped away, knowing the LORD is the only thing worth having.

Primary Claim: God is stripping His people of every substitute confidence — social trust, natural wisdom, physical strength, religious externalism — in order to expose that the knowledge of Himself, the God who does steadfast love, justice, and righteousness, is the only legitimate ground of human identity and boasting.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Central Theological Pivot: Verses 23–24

The most significant interpretive question in Jeremiah 9 is how to read the structural relationship between the extended lament and judgment material (vv. 1–22) and the boasting oracle of verses 23–24. A common preaching approach treats verses 23–24 as an independent wisdom unit — a timeless maxim that can be lifted out and applied generically. This approach is not wrong in what it affirms (the theological content of vv. 23–24 is true and rich) but it misses what the chapter is *doing*. The lament sections are not a dark introduction to a bright punchline. They are the experiential demonstration that wisdom, strength, and riches have failed — that the very structures Judah trusted are collapsing around them. The boasting oracle in verses 23–24 arrives after twenty-two verses of catastrophic diagnostic precisely because the reader has been stripped down by that point. The Reformed reading insists that this passage’s force depends on reading the whole chapter as a single movement: judgment as the instrument by which God recalibrates worship. Treating verses 23–24 as extractable from that context domesticates them.

Wesleyan/Arminian and Pietist Readings

Wesleyan and broader pietist traditions tend to emphasize the personal and experiential dimension of “knowing God” in verse 24 (*yādaʿ*) — reading it as intimate relational knowledge and using it to ground an emphasis on sanctification and the transformed heart. This reading has genuine merit: *yādaʿ* in Hebrew does carry relational and experiential force, not merely propositional content. The Wesleyan instinct to read “knowing God” as involving affective and volitional transformation is a legitimate insight. However, the Wesleyan reading tends to individualize the passage and underemphasize the covenantal and public dimensions of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness (*ḥesed*, *mišpāṭ*, *šēdāqâ*) in verse 24 — virtues that in their Old Testament context are as much covenant-structural and socially visible as they are inwardly experiential. The Reformed reading **acknowledges** the relational/affective dimension of *yādaʿ* while insisting that “knowing the LORD” here is covenantally shaped: to know the LORD is to know the one who acts in history with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness, and who calls His people to be conformed to those same attributes.

Dispensational Readings

Dispensational readings of verses 25–26 tend to emphasize the distinction between physical circumcision (the old covenant sign) and spiritual circumcision, sometimes reading the passage as anticipating the Church age and the end of ethnic-Israel-centered covenantalism. This reading correctly identifies the heart-circumcision theme but tends to move too quickly to a Church/Israel discontinuity framework that the text itself does not press. In context, the oracle in verses 25–26 is a leveling judgment: Judah stands in a list of nations whose outward markers of identity do not protect them, because the heart has not been conformed to the LORD. The passage is not primarily about Israel’s future in relation to the Church; it is about the insufficiency of external religious marking absent covenantal heart-orientation. The Reformed reading **qualifies** the dispensational reading: the heart-circumcision theme is genuinely present and has legitimate New Covenant resonance (Deuteronomy 10:16, Romans 2:28–29), but the passage’s primary concern is judgment on outward-without-inward religion, not a programmatic statement about Israel and the Church.

Therapeutic/Moralistic Misreading

A recurring homiletical failure — not a formal theological tradition but a preaching pattern — is to read the lament sections (especially vv. 1–6) primarily as validation of grief and emotional honesty before God, and to move from there to an application about the permission to lament. This is not wrong in itself; prophetic lament is a legitimate biblical genre and Jeremiah’s grief is genuine and instructive. But the lament in chapter 9 is *diagnostic*, not primarily *therapeutic* — it is grief *over sin and its consequences*, not grief offered as a spiritual practice. Applications centered on “it’s okay to grieve” miss the specificity of what Jeremiah is grieving: moral collapse, deceit, the forsaking of Torah, and the coming judgment. The Reformed reading **refutes** any reading that evacuates the lament of its forensic and covenantal content and repositions it as primarily an emotional permission structure.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 10:12–16** — “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart”: the Mosaic foundation for the heart-circumcision theme of Jeremiah 9:25–26, and the original covenantal demand that loving and fearing the LORD cannot be reduced to external observance.
- **1 Corinthians 1:26–31** — Paul’s explicit quotation and application of Jeremiah 9:23–24 (“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord”) in the context of God’s election of the weak and foolish; demonstrates the apostolic understanding that the boasting oracle is an anti-pride, anti-human-glory principle operative in the New Covenant.
- **Romans 2:28–29** — “A Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit”: Paul’s direct development of Jeremiah 9:25–26 and the distinction

between outward religious marking and the circumcised heart, now applied to the New Covenant community.

- **Hosea 6:6** — “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”: the closest Old Testament parallel to Jeremiah 9:23–24’s privileging of knowing God over religious performance, confirming this as a sustained prophetic theme, not an isolated oracle.
- **John 17:3** — “This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”: the New Covenant’s climactic statement that knowing God is the substance of life itself — the eschatological fulfillment of what Jeremiah 9:24 names as the only legitimate boast.

Aim: To expose every false confidence structure and redirect the reader’s trust, identity, and boasting toward the knowledge of the LORD who does steadfast love, justice, and righteousness.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Jeremiah wishes for a wilderness refuge to escape his people; his eyes weep over the slain	Lament functions as diagnostic, not merely emotional expression; “slain” anticipates the judgment of vv. 17–22
2	He wishes to flee from the adulterers and treacherous assembly	“Adulterers” is covenantally loaded — spiritual as well as social unfaithfulness
3	The tongue is bent like a bow for lies; they do not know the LORD	Critical phrase: “they do not know me” — direct echo/anticipation of vv. 23–24
4–5	Warning to trust no neighbor, no brother; every neighbor is a deceiver, every friend a slanderer	Social fabric has completely unraveled; deceit is not exceptional but structural
6	Dwelling in deception; they refuse to know the LORD	Repeated: “refuse to know me” — the interpretive key to the whole chapter
7–9	The LORD speaks: He must	God’s judgment presented

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	refine and test them; what else can He do given their treachery? The rhetorical question implies inevitability of judgment	as both necessary and relational — “shall I not punish?”
10–11	The LORD laments over the ruined mountains and pastures; Jerusalem and Judah’s cities will become a jackals’ lair	God Himself mourning — parallels Jeremiah’s grief; the land bears judgment’s consequences
12–13	Who is wise enough to understand why the land perished? Answer: because they forsook the Torah	Wisdom interlude — natural wisdom cannot diagnose the catastrophe without Torah
14–16	The LORD: they followed the Baals as their fathers taught them; therefore scattering, sword, and exile	Idolatry is named as the root cause; judgment follows covenant logic
17–19	Call for the mourning women to raise a lament; the people told to teach their daughters the dirge	Professional mourning as ironic commentary — this disaster is so certain it needs pre-arranged lamentation
20–22	Death has climbed in through the windows; young men cut down, corpses like dung in the field	Pervasive, inescapable death; no class or age is immune
23	Let not the wise boast in wisdom, the strong in strength, the rich in riches	The three great human confidence systems identified and prohibited
24	Let him who boasts boast in this: knowing and understanding the LORD who does <i>ḥesed</i> , <i>mišpāṭ</i> , <i>šēdāqâ</i>	The only legitimate boast; knowing God is defined by His character and actions
25–26	Days are coming when the LORD will punish all who are circumcised-but-uncircumcised; Judah in the list alongside Egypt, Edom,	External religious marking without heart-conformity provides no protection; Israel is not exceptional

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Ammon, Moab	

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Prophet’s Lament: Moral Collapse and the Refusal to Know the LORD
2	7–11	The LORD’s Response: Judgment Is Inevitable and Lamented
3	12–16	The Wisdom Diagnosis: Forsaking Torah, Following Idols
4	17–22	The Dirge Commission: Death Is Coming; Prepare to Mourn
5	23–24	The Only Legitimate Boast: Knowing the LORD
6	25–26	The Final Leveling: External Religion Without the Circumcised Heart

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: When all false grounds of boasting are stripped away, knowing the LORD is the only thing worth having.

Primary Claim: God is stripping His people of every substitute confidence — social trust, natural wisdom, physical strength, religious externalism — in order to expose that the knowledge of Himself, the God who does steadfast love, justice, and righteousness, is the only legitimate ground of human identity and boasting.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Identify your functional boast. Every person carries a primary confidence structure — the thing that, when it is secure, makes them feel that they are okay, that they matter, that they are enough. For Judah it was wisdom, strength, and riches; the contemporary equivalents are intelligence and credentials, power and influence,

financial security and status. Jeremiah 9:23–24 does not merely prohibit these things — it diagnoses them as substitute gods. The listener needs to ask not “do I intellectually affirm that God is better?” but “where do I actually go when I need to feel okay?” That functional boast is the idol the passage is addressing.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Let the grief of the chapter do its diagnostic work before rushing to the oracle. The preacher and the listener who move immediately to verses 23–24 without sitting with the devastation of verses 1–22 will receive the boasting oracle as a mild religious correction rather than as a word spoken to a person who has watched their confidence structures collapse. The intended affective movement of Jeremiah 9 is grief that opens into reorientation. The appropriate congregational response includes mourning — over the deceit that structures our social worlds, over the deaths that attend human pride, over the ways we have refused to know the LORD. This grief is not an end in itself; it is the affective preparation for receiving verse 24 as life rather than as religious obligation.

3. [Mind/Belief] — Understand that “knowing the LORD” in verse 24 has specific content: *ḥesed*, *mišpāṭ*, *šĕdāqâ*. The passage does not call for a vague spiritual intimacy with a deity of our own projection. The LORD who is worth knowing is defined by His own character as the One who *does* steadfast covenant love, *does* justice, and *does* righteousness *in the earth* — meaning publicly, historically, concretely. To know this God is to know the One whose character is on the record and whose actions in covenant history define what love, justice, and righteousness mean. Any “knowing God” that does not involve conformity to these three attributes is the kind of knowledge Jeremiah’s contemporaries thought they had while practicing deceit and idolatry. Knowledge of God that does not change how one treats neighbors is the false circumcision of verses 25–26.

4. [Will/Behavior] — Let the circumcision of the heart test the authenticity of outward religious practice. The closing oracle (vv. 25–26) places Israel on a list of pagan nations, not because Israel is not different but because Israel’s outward covenant markers have become detached from the heart orientation those markers were meant to express. The direct contemporary application: religious practices — church attendance, biblical knowledge, liturgical participation, public moral alignment — that are not expressions of a heart oriented toward the LORD who does *ḥesed*, *mišpāṭ*, and *šĕdāqâ* become the very circumcision-in-flesh-only that God declares He will judge. The listener should examine not whether they maintain religious practice but whether that practice expresses genuine knowledge of and conformity to the LORD’s character.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Receive the gospel as the ground that makes boasting in the LORD possible rather than impossible. The demand of Jeremiah 9:23–24 — “boast only in this” — confronts the honest listener with an impossibility: we do not, in fact, know the LORD the way this passage describes. We have trusted in wisdom, strength, and riches. We have practiced the deceit of verses 3–6. We have carried the uncircumcised heart of verses 25–26. The New Covenant answer (1 Corinthians 1:30–31) is that Christ has become for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption — so that the one who boasts boasts in the Lord. The knowledge of God available in the gospel is not a standard

we achieve but a gift we receive. The appropriate affective response is not determination but wonder: the very thing Jeremiah's contemporaries refused to have (the knowledge of God) has been given to us in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Jeremiah 9 establishes a comprehensive theology of misplaced confidence and its consequences. The chapter teaches that God's judgment is not arbitrary or impersonal — it is the inevitable outcome of a people who have built their social, intellectual, economic, and religious lives on something other than the knowledge of the LORD. The passage further teaches that the character of the LORD — His steadfast love (*hesed*), justice (*mišpāṭ*), and righteousness (*šedāqâ*) — is not incidental to His identity but constitutive of it, and that to know God is to be brought into conformity with these attributes. Most significantly, the chapter demonstrates that external religious marking without internal heart-reorientation is covenantally worthless — a theme that places Jeremiah 9 in direct anticipation of the New Covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:31–34, where the law will be written on the heart rather than merely observed in practice.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Jeremiah 9 is foundational for the Reformed understanding of total depravity as covenantal abandonment: Israel's collapse is not merely moral failure but the systematic replacement of the living God with substitute confidence systems at every level of social and personal life. The passage grounds the Reformed instinct that the human heart is constitutively idolatrous — it does not merely err occasionally but structurally orients itself toward false saviors. The boasting oracle of verses 23–24 is the Old Testament foundation for what the Reformation recovered as the *solus* of the gospel: all human grounds of boasting — including religious and moral ones — are stripped away so that the one ground of boasting is in the LORD alone. Paul's quotation in 1 Corinthians 1:31 shows that the Reformation's "glory to God alone" was not a doctrinal novelty but a recovery of the prophetic claim that Jeremiah 9 makes with full force. The passage also grounds the Reformed emphasis on covenant objectivity — circumcision of the heart is not a matter of intensity of religious feeling but of actual conformity of the heart to the LORD who does steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the world.

Main Takeaway

God has been dismantling every structure His people trusted instead of Him — and He is doing the same thing to every reader of this chapter. Wisdom, strength, and money are not

the problem; *boasting in them* is — treating them as the thing that makes you okay, secure, significant, and enough. The one thing worth boasting in is that you know the LORD: the God who is on the record as doing steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, and who in Christ has made that knowledge available as a gift rather than a demand. Stop finding your life in things that death can cut down. Find it in the only One death could not hold.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Extracting verses 23–24 from their context and preaching them as a standalone wisdom maxim.** This is the most common mishandling of the chapter. Verses 23–24 are the pivot point of a full chapter of lamentation and diagnostic judgment. Their force depends on arriving at them after twenty-two verses of collapsing confidence structures. Preachers who begin with verses 23–24 and use the rest of the chapter as supporting material reverse the intended movement and defuse the charge the passage is designed to carry. The stripping must precede the redirecting.
- **Preaching the lament sections (vv. 1–6) as primarily about emotional permission before God.** Jeremiah’s grief is real and instructive, but it is grief over specific things: the moral collapse of his people, the deceit that has replaced social trust, the refusal to know the LORD. Sermons that pivot from this grief to “it’s okay to lament” have substituted a therapeutic application for the diagnostic one the text is making. The lament is in service of the diagnosis; the diagnosis is in service of the boasting oracle.
- **Failing to define “knowing the LORD” with the specificity the passage provides.** Verse 24 does not say “know God personally” in the abstract — it says know the LORD who *does* ḥesed, mišpāṭ, and šedāqâ. Preaching that remains at the level of “relationship with God” without filling that relationship with the specific content of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness produces a warm but formless piety that does not engage the social and ethical dimensions the passage is addressing. This is especially important given that the deceit diagnosed in verses 3–6 is precisely a social and relational failure.
- **Treating the three prohibited boasts (wisdom, strength, riches) as individual vices to be abandoned rather than as systemic confidence structures to be diagnosed.** The passage is not calling for intellectual humility, physical modesty, and financial simplicity as such. It is identifying three architectures by which human beings construct their identity and security apart from the LORD. The preacher should press beneath surface behaviors to the root question: *in what are you trusting when everything is on the line?* That is the boast the passage is dismantling.
- **Reading verses 25–26 as primarily prophetic/programmatic about Israel and the nations rather than as a pastoral warning about religious externalism.** The point

of the closing oracle is not primarily to make a statement about the comparative standing of ethnic groups but to warn the covenant community that outward religious marking without the circumcised heart is no protection against judgment — and that in this respect Israel stands with the nations, not above them. Preachers in contexts where church membership, baptism, or moral reputation function as comfort systems need to press this application directly.

- **Failing to connect the passage to its New Covenant fulfillment and thereby leaving the congregation with a demand they cannot meet.** The command “let him who boasts boast in this” lands as pure law if it is not grounded in the gospel. Jeremiah 9:23–24 is not merely a call to spiritual prioritization — it is a diagnosis of the human condition that the New Covenant addresses by providing, in Christ, the knowledge of God that fallen humanity refuses to seek. Paul’s use of this passage in 1 Corinthians 1:31 and John 17:3 should inform the application: the knowledge of God worth boasting in has been given as a gift in the gospel, not achieved as a spiritual discipline.